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THE NEW YORKER

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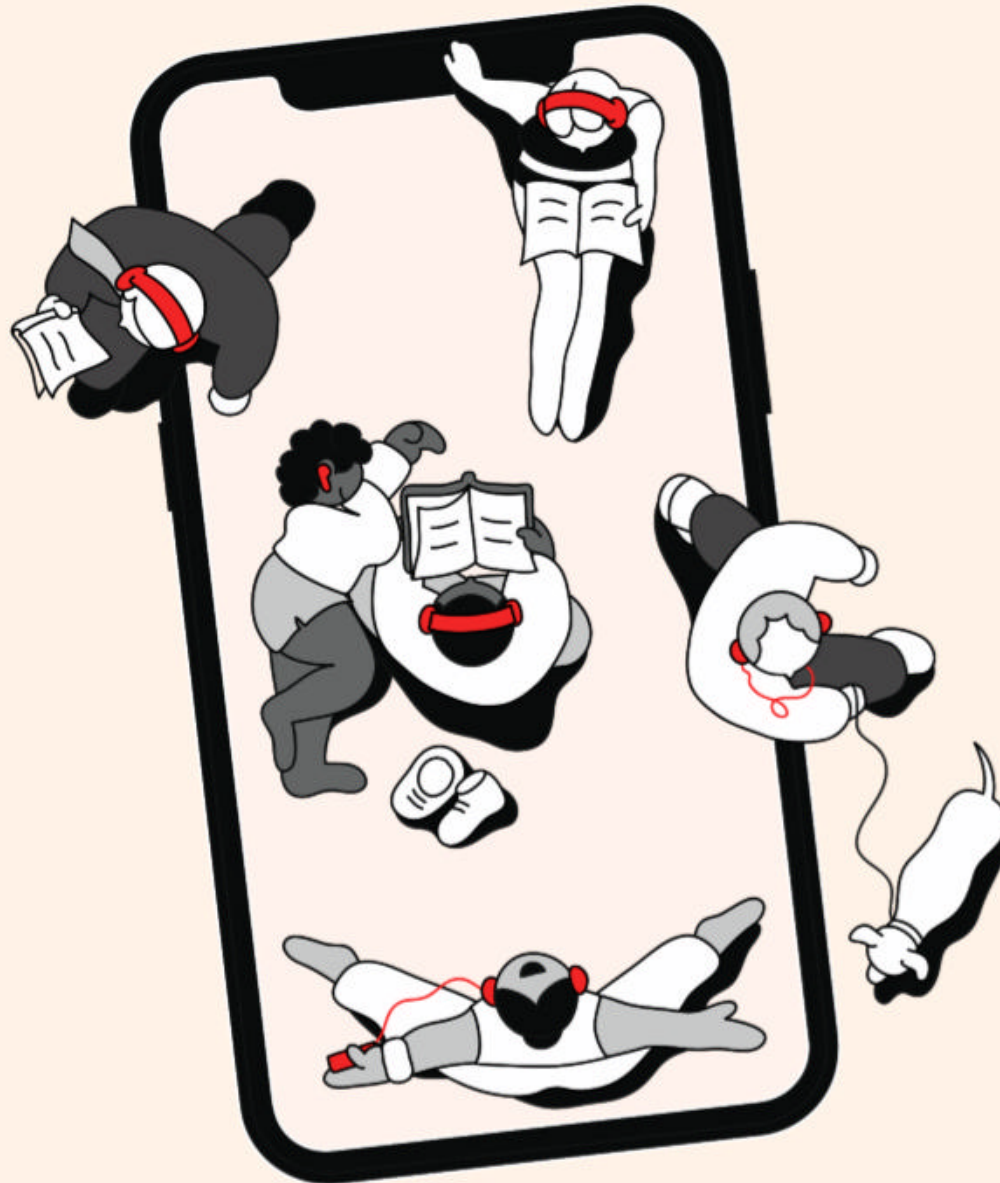
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Saïd Sayrafiezadeh (*Fiction*, p. 50), the author of “When Skateboards Will Be Free” and “Brief Encounters with the Enemy,” will publish a new story collection, “American Estrangement,” in August.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



CULTURAL COMMENT

Cal Newport writes about why spaces close to the home—but not inside it—are ideal for working remotely.



ANNALS OF POPULISM

Benjamin Wallace-Wells on a prominent liberal Zionist’s move to the left on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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THE MAIL

COULD SCOTLAND SECEDE?

As a British citizen studying in the U.S., I enjoyed Sam Knight's article about Nicola Sturgeon, whose rise to power reflects the growing influence of Scotland's independence movement ("Separation Anxiety," May 10th). Much of Knight's analysis was proved correct with the Scottish National Party's victory in the recent parliamentary elections. But I question his assertion that Sturgeon's position as a "left-of-center nationalist" is "an apparent oxymoron." Independence movements have had a long association with liberal and left-wing politics. Think of Woodrow Wilson's support of self-determination in his Fourteen Points, during and after the First World War, or of Irish nationalism—embodied in many ways by the democratic-socialist Sinn Féin party—or of the left-leaning independence parties in Catalonia today. In the face of modern right-wing nationalism, it is important to remember that independence movements and nationalism are not inextricably tied to conservative politics.

Matthew Turner
Washington, D.C.

TAKING U.F.O.S SERIOUSLY

Gideon Lewis-Kraus deftly describes the historical and current fascination with U.F.O.s from the perspective of both believers and detractors ("The U.F.O. Papers," May 10th). The eminent psychologist Carl Jung was also interested in these astral phenomena, and, in the nineteen-fifties, wrote a monograph on the topic, titled "Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky." He theorized that mass reports of U.F.O. sightings had to do with people seeking new meaning in their lives, amid Cold War threats such as the atomic bomb. In times of societal crisis, it seems that people look to the skies. Owing to COVID-19, we are now experiencing another upheaval. I doubt that Jung would have been surprised by the news that U.F.O. sight-

ings have surged during the pandemic.

Alvin Wang
Professor of Psychology
University of Central Florida
Winter Park, Fla.

LADIES FIRST

I read with interest Amy Davidson Sorkin's review of the recent biographies of two former First Ladies, Lady Bird Johnson and Nancy Reagan (Books, April 26th & May 3rd). Davidson Sorkin recounts how Nancy Reagan said that the First Lady was foremost "a wife." "What will it mean," Davidson Sorkin asks, "when a President has a husband or, for that matter, a nonbinary spouse?" The sea change, in my view, comes not with the advent of a differently gendered First Partner but, rather, with the recognition that the Presidential spouse can be a collaborative partner to the President yet also a multifaceted individual, and not simply a supportive side player.

L. M. Toumey
Boise, Idaho

THE HOME FRONT

As a man who worked in a home-economics department during the late sixties, I saw much of what Margaret Talbot describes in her piece about women in the field (Books, April 26th & May 3rd). Seniors at my state teachers' college would stay in the "home management" house, a term that captures home ec's rational emphasis. But another goal was to develop emotional skills through courses on marriage and family. Although these different approaches to home life did not fully integrate with one another, they provided many young women with a broader view of their own capabilities and worth.

David C. Balderston
New York City

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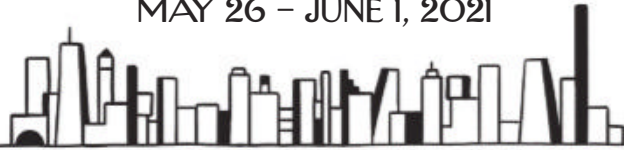
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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MAY 26 – JUNE 1, 2021



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Part High Line, part Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, the new public park **Little Island**—the brainchild of the mogul Barry Diller—sprang from the Hurricane Sandy-battered remains of Pier 54, on the Hudson River. Its aesthetic is refined whimsy: undulating topography (by Heatherwick Studio), lush gardens (by the landscape architects at M.N.L.A.), and performance spaces, including an amphitheatre overlooking the water and a lawn for concerts. The park is now open for exploring; free programming starts in mid-June.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER FISHER

MUSIC

Curtis Amy & Dupree Bolton: “Katanga!”

JAZZ In the late sixties and early seventies, after more than a decade of journeyman jazz work, the fine West Coast-based saxophonist Curtis Amy had his moment in the sun, appearing on hit recordings by the Doors and Carole King. Dupree Bolton, Amy’s nominal co-leader on the 1963 album “Katanga!,” now reissued on vinyl, is best known for disappearing from the public eye soon after the album was released, before he was able to cement his reputation as a passionate and inventive trumpeter. This means that “Katanga!,” a fervent project that captures a transitional moment when hard-bop players began exploring newer modes of jazz expression, has the added cachet of being one of the very few records on which Bolton’s promising work can be found. Bolton and Amy, heard here on both tenor and soprano saxes, deserve more than footnote status—as do their bandmates, including the pianist Jack Wilson and the guitarist Ray Crawford, each an undervalued stylist.—*Steve Futterman*

“The Illustrated Pianist”

CLASSICAL This imaginative multimedia event, assembled by the pianist and composer Nicole Brancato at the Plaxall gallery, in Long Island City, honors the centenary, in 2020, of the iconic science-fiction author Ray Bradbury and the seventieth anniversary, this year, of his celebrated story collection “The Illustrated Man.” The program comprises works by nine composing pianists, including Anthony de Mare, Jed Distler, Kathleen Supové, and Adam Tendler, accompanied by visual elements designed by the artist Eve Nova. Admission is free of charge; proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-test result is required for entry.—*Steve Smith (May 29 at 7; culturelab.org.)*

Jayda G: “DJ-Kicks”

ELECTRONIC The Vancouver native Jayda Guy has emerged in recent years as one of the most sharply focussed younger disco d.j.s. Her sets are as much a product of the jazz and R. & B. that initially fed into disco as of the genre’s manifold latter-day variations. On her entry to the long-running “DJ-Kicks” series, Guy’s selections range widely—old-school tracks from Aged in Harmony and Atmosfear lead us to a cut-up of a Cathy Dennis pop-house anthem and a winsome DJ Koze nightcap—but she ties them together in an easy glide that reverberates further the more you play it.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Lambchop: “Showtunes”

ROCK In the long string of unorthodox albums that Kurt Wagner has made with his fluctuating Nashville band, Lambchop, the latest, “Showtunes,” assumes a place of distinction. It may be the moment, Wagner proclaimed in an interview with *The Fader*, that listeners think, “Yep, that’s where he really went off the rails.” The album suggests a creepy snake shed of its skin, with the once ample group reduced

to a small cluster of far-flung, pandemic-era collaborators, including the Cologne d.j. Twit One and the trumpeter C. J. Camerieri. Even Wagner’s lyrics, traditionally Lambchop’s engine, feel haunted in their spareness, the action often occurring in the gaps between words. “If it’s the last thing we do together, let’s fall in love,” he croons in “Fuku,” the record’s showstopper. The romantic line might align with the LP’s title, but the music surrounding it—blippy stutters, wafts of horn, a prolonged drone—belongs squarely to the avant-garde.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

New York Opera Fest

CLASSICAL This year, New York Opera Fest, a loose coalition of companies that offer programming around the same time, in late spring, turns its attention to new music. Beth Morrison Projects, the brains behind the much admired Prototype Festival, presents Next Gen, a competition for emerging composers, in a free streaming concert filmed at National Sawdust, in Brooklyn (available starting May 27 at 7:30; nationalsawdust.org). A judging panel of composers and opera-company administrators hears ten short vocal works and chooses two composers to receive a larger commission. Later in the week, Heartbeat Opera, known for its clever, modernized takes on the canon, live-streams a workshop of its first-ever commission, Daniel Schlosberg’s “The Extinctionist,” due next spring.—*Oussama Zahr (May 29 at 7:30 and May 30 at 3; heartbeatopera.org.)*

Yo La Tengo, Steve Gunn

ROCK As the pandemic shushed performance spaces the world over, Kaatsbaan Cultural Park managed to scale up, inaugurating a spring program that pushes the Tivoli arts center beyond its dance roots. After debuting its music portion with Patti Smith, the festival hosts shows by a pair of state-of-the-art indie acts.

May 29 belongs to Yo La Tengo, the beloved grande dame of college radio. The mere fact of this band’s presence onstage is reassuring: picturing the musicians barred from rock venues during the COVID months conjures images of animals removed from their natural habitat, growing listless and potentially bitey. The following day is headlined by Steve Gunn, whose blistering guitar and slow-burn success might find resonance with Yo La Tengo. Both concerts take place on Kaatsbaan’s outdoor grounds, which spent its equally glamorous past life as an equestrian play space for a young Eleanor Roosevelt.—*J.R. (May 29-30; kaatsbaan.org.)*

ART

“Alice Neel: People Come First”

A commonplace observation about great portraitists is that they are always, in some way, painting themselves. Neel’s genius was to make us understand not just her interest in her subjects but why we are interested in one another. The Met’s spectacular retrospective of the American painter, co-curated by Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey with clarity and rigor, is organized according to eight dominant themes in Neel’s life as a woman and an artist, including home, motherhood, and the nude. Within those categories, the paintings are mostly hung chronologically, so that we can see how Neel developed and changed vis-à-vis each theme. At first, this felt a little too regimented to me, but after a second visit I saw the logic in it: Neel has too many artistic layers for a straight chronological show. There’s a profound spiritual component to the work; her intense and casual surfaces feel like a wall that she wants her subjects’ souls to walk through to meet ours. At times, her focus, her desire to understand who her subjects are and,

HIP-HOP



J. Cole’s sixth album, “**The Off-Season**,” is filled with songs that convey triumph and relief, reanalyzing close calls. Big-money rapper talk is subverted by introspective tracks that rehash the deadly daily gamble of the life he avoided. To capture the extreme adversity of his upbringing, Cole returns to his favorite metaphor, the aspiring athlete—a decision that suits the album’s fanfare. Despite the bluster, the violent scenes of Cole’s youth are more evocative than any of the victory celebrations, and the comfort that money affords him is usually revealed to be a remedy for trauma. By taking an inquisitive position and reliving every dodged bullet that could’ve put his dream on ice, Cole not only restores gravity to his raps but grants himself command of his narrative.—*Sheldon Pearce*



Given the portable size, about six by eight inches, of the paintings of **Eleanor Ray**, you might guess that the young Brooklyn-based artist works on location, maybe in the Great Basin Desert, a Tuscan church, a studio with a view, or one of the other locales she portrays. But Ray doesn't paint from life, and she doesn't use photographs, either. Instead, the twenty-seven attention-sustaining oil-on-panel works in her current show, at the Nicelle Beauchene gallery (on view through June 5), document memories. In her gentle touch and deceptively modest scale, Ray has something in common with the elusive Albert York, whose paintings, as Fairfield Porter once wrote, "contain an emotion that he discovered outside himself." Ray lavishes the same love and reverence on a little bird that lands on a post (in "Western Meadowlark," from 2020, above) as she does on the angels painted by Giotto in Padua's Scrovegni Chapel, the subject of one interior here.—*Andrea K. Scott*

by extension, who you might be, can have you rushing out of the galleries for a breath of air.—*Hilton Als* (metmuseum.org)

"Deana Lawson: Centropy"

Lawson's large, dazzling portraits of Black subjects in symbolically dense domestic spaces—which look documentary but are often staged—first gained critical acclaim when they appeared in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. The American artist then proved the reach and appeal of her vision with transfixing images of Rihanna, made the following year. Now she is the first photographer to win the Hugo Boss Prize since its inception, in 1996. This related exhibition, at the Guggenheim, finds Lawson pushing the bounds of her chosen medium with inset holograms and mirrored frames. These devices underscore the interplanar air of her images, which, with their framed family snapshots, vibrant celestial décor, and devotional objects, often gesture to other realms. In "Monetta Pass-

ing," a deceased woman, lying peacefully on a bed of purple satin, is attended by a mourning man gazing directly into the camera; an enormous flower arrangement and a selection of mementos convey the intermingling of the everyday and the afterlife. Lawson's sumptuous metaphysics both transcend and acknowledge present-day politics. In the nude portrait "Daenare," a radiant woman poses on a staircase below a floral painting that draws the viewer's gaze upward, even as her ankle monitor serves as a reminder of surveillance and incarceration.—*Johanna Fateman* (guggenheim.org)

Maren Hassinger

The five new works in "Vessels," Hassinger's spare, powerful show at the Susan Inglett gallery, recall ancient forms: the curved silhouettes and hollow interiors of vases, urns, and amphorae. But their dramatic scale and unusual materials evoke biomorphic and industrial qualities, too. Trained as a fibre artist

in the nineteen-seventies, and active early in her career in the Black Arts Movement in L.A., Hassinger often fashions her pieces from frayed steel-wire rope. The artist used the material to create the two bulbous containers on the floor here—bristly sculptures that texturally contrast with three more ethereal works that almost seem to float in midair. (They're suspended from the ceiling.) Made of earth-toned polyester stretched taut over metal armatures, these swaying objects have the grace and translucency of dragonfly wings. They feel both prehistoric and contemporary, captivatingly outside of time in the restrained installation.—*J.F.* (inglettgallery.com)

THE THEATRE

A Dozen Dreams

In this project, conceived by Anne Hamburger with the dramaturge John Clinton Eisner and the designer Irina Kruzhilina, viewers visit twelve installations, listening through headphones to prerecorded texts by a dozen playwrights, including Martyna Majok, Mona Mansour, Ren Dara Santiago, Caridad Svich, and Lucy Thurber. Some of the dreams are of the aspirational, wishful kind, others the surreal, poetic visions one has in sleep. Though the rooms are beautifully designed and lit, each a self-contained universe, the experience of being in them is simultaneously intimate and disembodied—it seems as if you're inside the speakers' heads, yet they remain closed off. As soon as you leave Brookfield Place, the luxury mall where this production, from the immersive-theatre pioneers En Garde Arts, takes place, memories of the show quickly evaporate, as if it all had been, well, a dream.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli* (brookfieldplace.com; through May 30.)

Lights on the Radio Tower

Molly's father drank himself to death, and Molly (Carrie Manolakos) is in the process of sorting through his mess: what should she hold on to? What should she throw out? Even harder is figuring out if her frayed relationship with her brother, Jesse (Max Sangerman)—who has returned after eighteen years away—can be mended, or if it's going to end up in the junk pile. Emily Goodson and Kevin James Thornton's new roots-tinged folk-rock musical does not make enough of the flashbacks contrasting the siblings' youthful selves with their adult ones, worse for wear, and their conflict remains frustratingly on the surface. The most compelling aspect of this on-demand streaming production, directed by Gabriel Barre, is that it still manages a theatrical flair despite having been filmed: it's easy to imagine how it could play out on a stage.—*E.V.* (lightsontheradiotower.com)

DANCE

Ballet Hispánico

Surviving half a century is a big deal, so it's understandable that this company would try to keep the party going, celebrating its skilled dancers and its tradition of nurturing choreographic voices that express the diversity

of Latinx culture. Like last year's virtual fiftieth-anniversary gala, this year's (available on YouTube and on the company's Web site, May 28-June 10) alternates performances with testimonials from celebrity guests including Lin-Manuel Miranda and Rosie Perez. The program features premières from the esteemed ballerina Lauren Anderson, the hip-hop veteran Ana (Rokafella) Garcia, and the flamenco dancer Belén Maya.—*Brian Seibert (balletthispanico.org)*

Batsheva Dance Company

Ohad Naharin, one of the world's most imitated choreographers, is an artist of the stage. But back in November, when stages were closed, he released the first film adaptation of one of his works; it's available again, through the Joyce Theatre's Web site, May 27-June 2. "YAG," which debuted in 1996, is explicitly about family, especially the chosen family of a dance company. It's a fine example of Naharin's characteristic mix of eccentricity (fortune cookies crushed underfoot) and tenderness (verbal and physical expressions of love). What's adroitly captured in "YAG: The Movie" is the intimacy of a stage performance, intensified through closeups.—*B.S. (joyce.org)*

DanceAfrica

The forty-fourth edition of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's festival, virtual this year, turns its attention to Haiti. On May 29, each of the invited companies presents a dance devoted to a different *lwa*, a spirit of Haitian vodou. The works, collected in a film that's like a journey, are well represented by the medium, with the dancers presenting their contemporary visions of tradition in photogenic locations, mostly outdoors. The companies represent the spread of the Haitian diaspora, hailing not only from Haiti, as HaitiDansco does, but also from Oakland (Rara Tou Limen) and Brooklyn (Âse Dance Theatre Collective, the Fritization Experience). Other aspects of the festival—classes, conversations, the bazaar—continue in virtual form, too.—*B.S. (bam.org)*

Restart Stages at Lincoln Center

The outdoor stage at Damrosch Park (tucked behind the Metropolitan Opera House) isn't new, but it is newly relevant in this summer of outdoor performances. On June 1, the choreographer Sonya Tayeh (best known for her award-winning choreography on "So You Think You Can Dance") will present a new contemporary-dance work there, "Unveiling," featuring six topnotch dancers from American Ballet Theatre, Boston Ballet, Martha Graham, and Broadway. Free tickets are available through the TodayTix Lottery, at TodayTix.com, two weeks in advance.—*Marina Harss (restartstages.org)*

TELEVISION

The Underground Railroad

Barry Jenkins's reimagining of Colson Whitehead's popular novel "The Underground Railroad" is a compositional achievement—pictorial and psychological. A young Black

woman tumbling down a ladder into darkness is trailed by a flailing man, the obsessive slave-catcher Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton); the recurring sequence, which seems to reference the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder, puts us in a Biblical mood, and Jenkins's vision is that of Exodus. The darkness is an entryway to a subterranean railroad: a network of trains used to transport enslaved people out of bondage. This metaphor made literal is the show's framing conceit. The girl is Cora Randall (Thuso Mbedu, a revelation), who was born enslaved, on a Georgia plantation, and is pressured by a confidant named Caesar (Aaron Pierre) to escape North. The triumphs of "The Underground Railroad" are inextricable from its flaws. Jenkins's series tries deeply to understand the character of Cora, who is always onscreen yet remains unknowable. Jenkins is a virtuosic landscape artist, but, in the end, the show does not, and cannot, envision the place beyond Exodus.—*Doreen St. Félix (Reviewed in our issue of 5/24/21.)*

MOVIES

Final Account

This new documentary by Luke Holland (who died in 2020) features interviews that he conducted, starting in 2008, with dozens of now elderly Germans and Austrians who were members of Nazi Germany's S.S. or otherwise active in the Third Reich's system of death. The film is organized chronologically, starting with Hitler's rise to power and continuing to the end of the Second World War; the interviewees' experiences varied widely, ranging from those who were Nazi true believers to others who merely sought adventure. Individual testimonies also reflect a wide variety of attitudes: some, affirming that they were well aware of the ongoing genocide as it was happening, admit guilt and complicity; others express pride in their service, perpetuate Nazi ideas, and minimize

ON TELEVISION



The story of an unlikely May-December creative partnership is an old Hollywood formula—see, for instance, the 1950 film "Sunset Boulevard." That story doesn't exactly end well, but it's a thrill to watch the intergenerational tension play out in stinging barbs and rat-a-tat banter. "**Hacks**," a new comedy on HBO Max, created by Paul W. Downs, Lucia Aniello, and Jen Statsky, is a gentler riff on the Norma Desmond tale which also feels bracingly fresh and wholly original. The television legend Jean Smart plays Deborah Vance, an aging zinger comedienne from the Joan Rivers school, who affords her gaudy Las Vegas palazzo by doing a hundred casino standup shows a year and slinging products on QVC. She's a millionaire, but she's losing her edge. Enter Ava (Hannah Einbinder), a sardonic young red-headed comedy writer from L.A. who can't find work after posting a tasteless (and, worse, unfunny) tweet about a congressman. The two women share a slimy manager (Paul W. Downs), who tosses them together for a kind of mutual-redemption merger. Deborah needs new jokes, Ava needs a job; a near-screwball level of verbal delight (Deborah tells Ava she's "dressed as Rachel Maddow's mechanic") and madcap adventures ensue. This is Billy Wilder updated for the Internet age, and it truly works.—*Rachel Syme*

the Holocaust. Many anecdotes create mental images of horrors—the prevalence of normalized violence is overwhelming—but the shocking power of the details is vitiated in the format: Holland reduces interviews to snippets and sound bites and turns the work of investigation and commemoration into a mere survey.—*Richard Brody* (*In theatrical release.*)

The Flame and the Arrow

This 1950 swashbuckler stars Burt Lancaster as Dardo, the leader of a peasant revolt in twelfth-century Lombardy. The director, Jacques Tourneur, makes the medieval adventure a symbol of the French Resistance in the Second World War and situates its roots in class warfare. He also makes exuberant use of his star's acrobatic gifts, casting Lancaster's former circus partner, Nick Cravat, as his sidekick, Piccolo, and incorporating their astounding leaps and catches, balancing acts and high-wire daring, into the revolutionary raids. In the romantic backstory, Dardo's wife, Francesca (Lynn Baggett), has run off with

Count Ulrich (Frank Allenby), the predatory commander of the Teutonic occupation, known as the Hawk, and left Dardo to care for their five-year-old son, Rudi (Gordon Gebert). The action is sparked by the Hawk's kidnapping of Rudi, whom he holds hostage in an attempt—unsuccessful, of course—to break Dardo's fighting spirit. Scenes of a rebel camp amid Greek ruins suggest political redemption through the marriage of popular and classical arts, as does Norman Lloyd's sparkling turn as a troubadour who exudes the insolent energy of revolt.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.*)

Stories We Tell

Sarah Polley's 2012 documentary is a startling mixture of private memoir, public inquiry, and conjuring trick. On camera, she quizzes a long list of relatives and friends, beginning with her father, Michael, and her siblings. The subject is Polley's late mother, Diane, an effervescent soul, as we see from old home movies; as the story unfolds, however, the

footage seems to be so profuse, and so oddly convenient, that we start to question our assumptions about her—which is exactly what Polley had in mind. (She is an actor, as were both of her parents; clearly, an acute strain of make-believe runs in the blood.) The main secret that is dug up by Polley's investigations into her own origins is somehow more invigorating than traumatic, although there are hints of collateral anxiety among her brothers and sisters; the very ordinariness of the saga, however, becomes its strength, and, if viewers leave the screening feeling destabilized, determined to chip away at the apparently fixed narratives that sustain their own families, then the movie's job is done.—*Anthony Lane* (*Streaming on Tubi, YouTube, and other services.*)

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One

William Greaves's drama, which he shot in 1968 and completed in 1971, is one of the greatest movies about moviemaking. Greaves wrote a brief script about a couple, Freddie and Alice, in romantic and sexual crisis. He cast many different pairs of actors to play the roles in New York's Central Park, while three camera operators (including Greaves) filmed the performances, the surrounding activity, and one another. What results is also a documentary about the crew on location; situations that arise along the way—a mounted police officer asking to see the production's permit, a crowd of teenagers gathering to watch the shoot—are woven into the action. Greaves also includes lengthy scenes that crew members made, without his knowledge, in which they debate his methods and his motives; he turns the production into a study of power and its radical reorganization. With ingenious visual effects, he puts multiple images onscreen simultaneously; fuelled by the force of Greaves's vision and personality, the frame-breaking, frame-multiplying reflexivity lends these local stories a vast, world-embracing scope.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel, HBO Max, and Kanopy.*)

The Woman in the Window

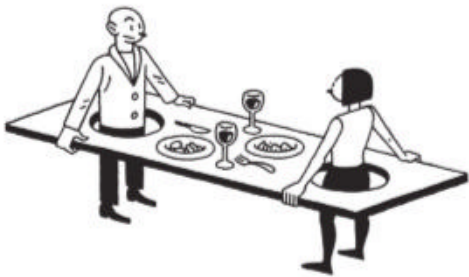
Though the details of this thriller, adapted from a novel by A. J. Finn, range from banal to absurd, the movie is directed, by Joe Wright, with hectic energy. Amy Adams stars as Anna Fox, an agoraphobic psychologist who hasn't left her Harlem town house in ten months. A new family, the Russells, moves in across the street; the fifteen-year-old Ethan (Fred Hechinger) befriends Anna, as does his mother, Jane (Julianne Moore). But when Anna, peering through her window and into theirs, sees Jane being murdered, she calls the police—who seem to gaslight her out of her perceptions, in cahoots with the Russell paterfamilias, Alistair (Gary Oldman), and another woman claiming to be Jane (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Anna's tangle of terror and menace of delusion are filmed in screechingly shadowed, striated, tilted images that represent her states of mind far more effectively than they do the movie's action. Eventually, the whodunnit angle kicks in and Wright's inspiration dwindles, but the movie's first hour of tense setup is piquant and haunting.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Netflix.*)

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WHAT TO STREAM



The weird, threadbare melodrama **"The Woman Condemned,"** from 1934 (now streaming on the Criterion Channel), is directed by the former silent-film star Dorothy Davenport, who infuses its awkward story with stark intensity. A radio star (Lola Lane) takes a sudden vacation, but her fiancé, the station manager (Jason Robards, Sr.), suspects her of hiding at home; she's stalked by a mysterious woman (Claudia Dell) who, when shots ring out, is arrested for the star's murder. The tangled script—written by the movie's producer, Willis Kent, best known for exploitation films—includes a tawdry night-court scene, involving two women charged with "soliciting" and a wily young reporter (Richard Hemingway) with a savior complex, as well as a macabre sequence at the clinic of a secretive doctor (Mischa Auer) with a mad-scientist air. Davenport does wonders with a scant budget, conjuring a nighttime chase with documentary street scenes and resolving the climactic complications of a police-station showdown with simple yet exciting trickery. Where many studio films depict the sordid night world of swift operators, this work of marginal cinema seems to belong to it.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Xilonen

905 Lorimer St., Brooklyn

Guevara's

39 Clifton Pl., Brooklyn

Xilonen, the Aztec goddess of sustenance and maize, is often depicted with ears of corn in each hand. The other day, my stance was not dissimilar as I sat at a table outside her namesake Greenpoint café, opened, last December, by the chef Justin Bazdarich and his partner Chris Walton, as a sort of spinoff of Oxomoco, their inventive Mexican restaurant nearby. Between bites of a glorious masa pancake—its texture a harmonious balance of fluff and grit, a scoop of salted butter sliding tantalizingly down the slight dome of its bronzed and bubbled surface—I took refreshing sips of *atole*, a drink, usually porridge-thick and served warm, made from sweetened and spiced masa and milk; here it's strained and chilled into something more like horchata.

Masa—made with an heirloom variety of dried corn that's imported from Mexico but nixtamalized in-house—plays a role in almost every dish at Xilonen, although it's just as often supportive as it is starring, affording other

humble ingredients their moment. From mid-morning to afternoon, crunchy, undulating tostadas serve as pedestals for guacamole and sky-high curds of dense but velvety sunset-hued scrambled egg, topped with sharp Cheddar—broiled just enough to bear a hint of smoke—and an inky hazelnut salsa macha. In the evening, tostadas are spread with a silky purée of navy beans and carrot, then layered with serrano peppers, caramelized soy-marinated onions, a zesty carrot-top salsa verde, and tender spears of carrot that are braised in carrot juice before they're charred and maple-glazed.

Need I mention that Xilonen does not, as a rule, serve meat, poultry, or fish? I suppose it's good to know, but it would be a shame to overclassify a restaurant that sets its own terms. Its Mexican-American chef de cuisine, Alan Delgado, grew up in El Paso, Texas, cooking vegetarian food that adhered to a diet his mother had been prescribed while she was ill. The ways in which he's designed dishes to be “plant-forward,” as Xilonen self-identifies, do not leave the diner with a sense of absence but, rather, convey a honing-in. Here's a chance to really consider the purple potato (creamy and nutty, smashed between a soft tortilla and a lacy disk of griddled vegan mozzarella) or the guajillo chili pepper (blended into a wonderfully fruity hot sauce). Nor will an aesthete suffer: Xilonen's vibe, from plating to décor, is austere yet invitingly chic, sun-baked even on a cloudy day.

It would be easier to pigeonhole Guevara's, in Clinton Hill, where the menu is

also loosely Mexican, and whose Web site advertises it as “vegan forward”—which is to say, vegan. It's been a while since “Portlandia” went off the air, and yet the world continues producing fodder for it: the other day, as I lunched on Guevara's *torta milanesa*, made with breaded eggplant instead of the usual chicken or beef, and nachos wearing squiggles of cashew crema, my view was of a sandwich board, placed directly outside the café's front door, advertising the obscenely fleshy porchetta sandwich available at Mekelburg's, a meat-centric restaurant on the next block. Guevara's also trades in pricey houseplants and grocery items, including cans of Gardein-brand “plant-based be'f & vegetable” stew. I struggled to find a bottled drink that didn't contain “adaptogens” or hemp.

But Guevara's had the last laugh. The nachos—optimally sturdy, salty tortilla chips strewn with black lentils, olives, avocado, and jalapeños, in addition to the crema—were excellent, as was the young-coconut “ceviche,” tender slips of the meaty fruit, cured in citrus, with avocado, mango, and cilantro. I even loved the bagel and “lox,” featuring tofu cream cheese, marinated orange bell pepper in place of smoked salmon, and plenty of dill and capers. And I finally landed on a drink: a made-to-order rose-halvah iced latte—a double shot of espresso, black tahini, rose water, and raw sugar—dairy-free, hideously, hilariously murky, and absolutely delicious. (*Xilonen dishes \$6–\$15; Guevara's dishes \$2.50–\$10.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT CEASEFIRE AND IMPASSE

In early May, Palestinians protesting the pending eviction of six families from their homes in East Jerusalem clashed with Israeli police. For many Palestinians, the eviction cases evoked a long history of dispossession while presenting evidence of continued efforts to remove them from the city. These protests and others regarding Palestinian rights in Jerusalem devolved into street fights, and Hamas, from its redoubt in the Gaza Strip, warned that it might “not stand idly by.” On May 10th, its forces fired a fusillade of rockets and missiles at Israeli villages and cities, and the Israel Defense Forces responded with air strikes on Gaza, inaugurating a mini-war of depressingly familiar dimensions—the fourth in a dozen years between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

Last Thursday, after eleven days of destruction and loss of life, and behind-the-scenes mediation by the Biden Administration and Egypt, the combatants declared a ceasefire. The conflict and its announced termination had a ritualized aspect: Israel and Hamas both knew from the start that international diplomacy would offer an exit ramp whenever both were ready, and although past ceasefires have not always held initially, neither side seemed to want a prolonged war. For the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu—who is facing corruption charges and has struggled to hold on to power after several indecisive elections—thumping Hamas, even briefly, offered a reprise of his self-mythologizing role as the unbowed pro-

tector of Israel. For Hamas, a limited battle in the name of Jerusalem allowed it to advance claims to Palestinian leadership at a time when the group’s main rival, the Fatah Party, appeared weak, after its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority President, recently postponed long-awaited elections.

It was, as usual, always clear who the losers would be: Gaza’s two million people, who were trapped in a humanitarian crisis even before the bombs fell. Israel and Egypt maintain a blockade on the enclave, where high rates of poverty have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. In more than a thousand air and missile strikes, Israel said it targeted Hamas commanders and military “infrastructure,” but although Israeli forces adopted rules of attack designed to protect noncombatants, Palestinian civilian casualties mounted. Even the use of relatively precise aerial firepower against a

region as densely populated as Gaza is all but guaranteed to kill innocents. Israeli attacks claimed more than two hundred and thirty fatalities, including more than sixty children, and destroyed or damaged hospitals, residences, sewer systems, and the electric grid.

Suhaila Tarazi, who has run Gaza City’s Ahli Arab Hospital for about twenty-five years, found herself once again admitting scores of patients, this time with “broken limbs—lots of them,” she said on Wednesday. Diesel supplies for generators, her facility’s only reliable source of electricity, were running low; Tarazi had to ration power to keep operating theatres and X-ray machines functioning. Her medical director couldn’t come in that day, because an Israeli attack had struck his neighborhood, and he needed to take care of his elderly sisters, who had evacuated their home. Not far from the hospital, a section of the busy thoroughfare Wahda Street lay in ruins, after an Israeli strike on May 16th brought down buildings and killed forty-two people, including sixteen women and ten children. Israel acknowledged these civilian casualties; a military spokesperson said that a strike had crumpled a tunnel used by Hamas, unintentionally causing the collapse of nearby houses. For its part, Hamas fired more than four thousand rockets and missiles in indiscriminate attacks, killing at least twelve people in Israel.

As images of the dead and the injured in Gaza coursed across the global media, President Joe Biden did not criticize Israel in public. Last week, a narrative emanating from Washington emphasized the contrast between the President’s



back-channel diplomacy and the willingness of progressive Democrats in Congress, such as Representative Rashida Tlaib, to openly accuse Israel of committing war crimes. Biden was surely influenced by his experiences dealing with Israel as Vice-President during the Obama Administration, including during the last major conflict in Gaza, in 2014, when Israeli ministers directed scorn at then Secretary of State John Kerry for, in their view, pushing a ceasefire prematurely.

Netanyahu famously embarrassed and snubbed Barack Obama. Not incidentally, Obama and some of his advisers lost faith in the possibilities for peace in the Middle East. In his memoir, “A Promised Land,” he recounts how, in 2010, he hosted a dinner with Netanyahu, Abbas, then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and King Abdullah of Jordan, before reflecting, later that night, on “all the children, whether

in Gaza or in Israeli settlements” who would know “mainly violence, coercion, fear, and the nursing of hatred because, deep down, none of the leaders I’d met with believed anything else was possible.” There is little reason to think that Biden’s view today is much sunnier, yet his traditional, art-of-the-possible diplomacy seems to have helped to halt devastating violence.

The latest crisis in Gaza cannot be set aside as just another passing episode in Hamas’s forever war against Israel’s existence. The fighting coincided with shocks inside Israel’s recognized borders, where mob violence and attempted lynchings sundered ties between Jewish and Arab citizens and neighbors. An Arab mob pulled a driver presumed to be Jewish from his car in Acre and severely beat him, while Jewish extremists organized vigilante squads in dozens of WhatsApp groups and attacked Arab citizens and busi-

nesses in Bat Yam and elsewhere. Israel imposed states of emergency in several towns and cities, quelling the violence, at least temporarily.

Israel is the longest-lived democracy in the Middle East, and by many measures the most successful nation in the region, yet its continued occupation of the West Bank and its harsh blockade of Gaza have undermined its constitutional ideals and worsened internal fault lines that threaten its future. Netanyahu has been in power continuously since 2009, but his accommodations of far-right political parties and millenarian settler movements, coupled with his rejection of reconciliation with Palestinians, have failed to deliver durable security. It is easy to mistake an impasse for stability. However long the announced ceasefire in Gaza holds, there will be even less reason than before to confuse that state of quiet with peace.

—Steve Coll

ROME POSTCARD GLADIATOR IOI



At a café in a mountain town east of Rome, Benjamin Harnwell was wondering which of the five thousand applicants to his right-wing “gladiator school” he could introduce to a reporter without embarrassment. He thought of four, and dialled one up. “A journalist is looking to speak to some students,” he said into the phone, “and I don’t want him to wind up talking to some skin-head.” He listened, a religious medal rattling against his chest, his slicked-back hair shining. Harnwell hung up, saying that he’d been kidding about the skin-head thing. He then sped off in a white Fiat Punto, heading to the Certosa di Trisulti, a vast, eight-hundred-year-old charterhouse that is both his home and the site of his school.

Several years ago, encouraged by his friend Steve Bannon, the strategist behind President Donald Trump’s 2016 victory, Harnwell, a forty-five-year-old British Catholic, began leasing the monastery, for about a hundred thousand

dollars a year, from the Italian Ministry of Culture. Bannon has long been trying to foment populist insurgencies across Europe, and he viewed Trisulti as the perfect location for the Academy for the Judeo-Christian West, in which a new class of right-wing “culture warriors” would be trained. The aim, Bannon said, was “to generate the next Tom Cottons, Mike Pompeos, Nikki Hales: that next generation that follows Trump.”

Set high in the mountains and decorated with frescoes, the monastery is a lonesome outpost on Bannon’s European frontier. With Trump’s defeat and Bannon’s 2020 arrest, on wire-fraud charges (he was pardoned), the work of setting up the school feels newly urgent. Harnwell spent the past two years battling lawsuits, and now the Italian government is trying to evict him. He has until June to appeal, before the carabinieri drag him out. Bannon blames “corrupt bureaucracy,” saying, “This is the sort of thing you expect from third world countries, not a founding nation of Western Civilization.”

If the plan goes ahead, gladiatorial training in the Catholic conservative arts will be offered to about seventy-five students, who will receive academic credits, toward a master’s degree, from an as-yet-undisclosed Catholic university in the States. Students were to have re-

sided in old monks’ cells (no Wi-Fi), among a few lingering brothers. Applicants range in age from eighteen to eighty and include Italian academics and former U.S. marines. “We want people who have a sense that Western civilization is under threat,” Harnwell said.

The student he called, Alvino-Mario Fantini, is a fifty-two-year-old Ph.D. candidate in the Netherlands. “It’s wrong to accuse someone of racism and xenophobia, or Nazism, or any other ‘-ism’ without knowing their beliefs,” Fantini said by phone. He bitterly recalled being labelled a “fascist” in college for wearing a Dartmouth Indians sweatshirt. (The team has been renamed Big Green, to Fantini’s chagrin.) He applied to the academy in 2018, sending Harnwell a few clips blasting political correctness from the magazine he edits, *The European Conservative*.

The academy’s curriculum is devoted to the intellectual underpinnings of Bannonism, a cocktail of populist nationalism, libertarianism, and traditional Catholicism, angled vehemently against the European Union, China, Islam, gay rights, Pope Francis, abortion, and the left. Course titles include “Cultural Marxism, Radical Jihad, and the C.C.P.’s Global Information Warfare” and “The Early Church as a Business Enterprise.” The professors—whom Harnwell is reluctant

to name—will include browbeaten conservative instructors from obscure Catholic finishing schools. The academy will also offer media training, taught, ideally, by Bannon himself, and inspired by sessions held at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference. (As one CPAC participant put it, “They taught us how to speak about gay marriage without revealing our real thoughts.”)

When the idea for the academy was first floated, in Trump’s heyday, Harnwell had the support of a broad coalition of right-wingers, but that base is crumbling. The Italian government has moved leftward and has repeatedly taken Harnwell to court, alleging failure to pay rent and irregularities in his lease application. (Harnwell calls the charges “leftist disinformation.”) He prevailed until last month, and the litigation has drained him, financially and emotionally. He has also lost support from revanchist elements in the Vatican, and other allies are now disillusioned with Bannon’s attempts to re-create Trumpism in Europe. “They said it would be a cultural project, that they would make Trisulti again a place of study and prayer,” Rocco Buttiglione, a conservative-leaning former Italian minister, said. “Then Steve Bannon entered into the picture.”

Protests have been erupting in the woods near the monastery, the monks have fled, and Harnwell is preoccupied with pet problems: his dog likes to eat lamb shank, and his cat drowned in a medieval well. But he remains determined to open. “This is an existential battle for me between good and evil,” he said. But months of potential gladiatorial prep time have been wasted, and it’s hard not to be glum. “Now I’m a fund-raiser for my lawyers,” he said.

—Ben Munster

THE MUSICAL LIFE FLOTATION DEVICE



When the singer-songwriter Lucy Dacus turned twenty-five, last May, she bought herself a kayak. She woke up in the Philadelphia house that she shares with six roommates and went



Lucy Dacus

straight to a nearby Dick’s Sporting Goods, where she purchased a turquoise Pelican Trailblazer. She took to it quickly, regularly launching into the Schuylkill River or Lake Nockamixon. The hobby was something of an emotional life jacket for Dacus, whose career trickled to a slow drip when the pandemic hit. She finished recording her third solo LP, “Home Video,” in March, 2020, but put off mixing it during lockdown. (The album will come out next month.) With her tour dates cancelled or postponed, she focussed on her volunteer job at a bookstore, doing inventory and fulfilling phone orders. And she floated.

“You just kayak out to the middle of a lake, take your mask off, and *breathe*,” she said the other evening, outside the boathouse at Pier 84, where the Hudson River meets Forty-fourth Street. Dacus had decided to test her paddling skills in more cosmopolitan waters, booking a New York After Dark kayaking tour. (Because the hour-long tour began at seven-fifteen, the sky remained golden throughout.) Dacus is tall and has layered raven hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion, with the gently swaying posture of a cottonwood tree. She had on a red sweater, leggings, and dark suede oxfords.

The lead guide, a stocky man in Chacos named Dale Henderson, glanced down at Dacus’s footwear and frowned. “It kind of sucks to walk home in wet shoes,” he said. Dacus went barefoot.

Henderson wrangled a group of ten kayakers into a semicircle for a crash course in paddle technique. “We’re going

to find the middle of our paddle, the top where it splits, and we’re going to put it directly on top of our head,” he said. “Then we’re going to spread our arms out until both of our elbows make a ninety-degree angle.” Dacus aced it.

Henderson’s assistant, a stubbled young man named Joe Hille (stretchy pants, day job at Murray’s Cheese), helped Dacus settle into her kayak. She was worried about her back—she’d tweaked a vertebra while shelving books. As she began paddling, she stared up at the Intrepid, a hulking, gray-painted vessel that was built as an aircraft carrier but now serves as a museum and an event space. “They have parties on the warship?” she said, with a laugh. “This country sucks.”

The group made its way north, to Fifty-sixth Street, staying close to the piers. Except for a small wake from a passing ferry, the river was placid. “I’ve been thinking about living in the present,” Dacus said. “My record is so much about the past that people are asking me about time a lot.”

“Home Video” is her most personal album to date, recounting her coming of age, in Richmond, Virginia. She sings about lost friendships, queer love affairs, curfews, and other adolescent pursuits. (“Back in the cabin, snorting nutmeg in your bunk bed, you were waiting for a revelation of your own,” she sings on one track.) In 2019, she left Richmond. “It was getting weird,” she said. “Like, someone would post pictures of me eating.” She was becoming more famous, not just because of her solo career but also as a result of the EP she had recorded, in 2018, with her fellow-musicians Phoebe Bridgers and Julien Baker. (The all-female supergroup calls itself boygenius.) In Philadelphia, she spent the pandemic hunkered down with her roommates, with whom she formed a jokey house band called Cars 2. “There are only two rules,” she said. “Every song needs to be about cars, and every song needs to be a different genre. I wrote an electro-indie-pop song called ‘AAA,’ about waiting on the side of a highway for a really long time.”

At Pier 96, Dacus paddled out into the middle of the Hudson and looked back at the skyline. “It’s easier for me to think about other people’s present moment,” she said, and launched into a delphic reverie: “Like, wow, all these buildings

are so fucking huge. There are so many people in them. What's the sum total life experience of everyone that I can see right now?"

She mentioned a game that she used to play on car trips. "It's called Fall in Love with a Tree," she said. "The first tree you see in the distance, you just look at it and notice everything about it that makes it more special than the other trees." She figured that the exercise could easily be applied to buildings, and homed in on a glass tower in the financial district. "I'm picking it because it's not as noticeable," she said. Suddenly, a halo of white lights began to glow on the building's roof. Dacus smiled. "I made it light up."

—Rachel Syme

SPANDEX DEPT. RING CYCLE



As spring bloomed and pandemic restrictions withered, New Yorkers had a wider choice of entertainment options: baseball games, bowling alleys, comedy clubs. More legally murky were

performances of the spandex-heavy faux combat known as professional wrestling. Last month, a close reading of social-media posts and of a German wrestling-results site suggested that there could soon be such a show at a strip mall on Staten Island. Reached by phone, the show's organizer, Joey Bellini, guardedly confirmed its existence, but only after being assured that the inquirer was not one of his "enemies."

While the city's entertainment industry remained on pause, Bellini's outfit, Warriors of Wrestling, had quietly resumed monthly shows in July. "What are the guys gonna do?" Bellini said one Saturday afternoon, before a match. "They're not training for nothing." Sturdily built, with a shaved head and a salted brown goatee, Bellini was sitting by the indoor multiuse sports court where he stages his events. His day job is working as a hospital refrigeration operating engineer. In January, he contracted a mild case of COVID-19 between his first and second vaccine shots. For his initial pandemic productions, trainees served as the audience. Eventually, he welcomed wrestlers' friends and relatives; a few months ago, he started privately messaging loyal pre-COVID customers on Facebook. The shows were

not entirely secret—footage was posted online, including one reel set to the Judas Priest song "Breaking the Law," which got hundreds of views. But Bellini didn't promote them, because he was afraid of being shut down.

"You can't fight City Hall," he said. Even more intimidating is the state's Athletic Commission, which regulates New York wrestling events. "They're real scumbags," he said. "That's who I fear."

In the ring, performers paired off to hone the evening's choreography. Mime and onomatopoeia were part of the drill. ("I'll whip you to the post! Boom, bam!" one said, jerking his arms.) One woman, in red-and-gold Zubaz pants and a black Guns N' Roses hoodie, lay face down near the ring's edge while two colleagues marched in place on her back. "No, no, it's good," she assured them. An ample, neck-bearded young man in a pistachio polo and boat shoes, who performs as Frat Boy Farva, rehearsed a sequence in which an opponent thwacks him in the back with his own pledge paddle. "Ow!" Farva said, recoiling in earnest. "That's real wood!"

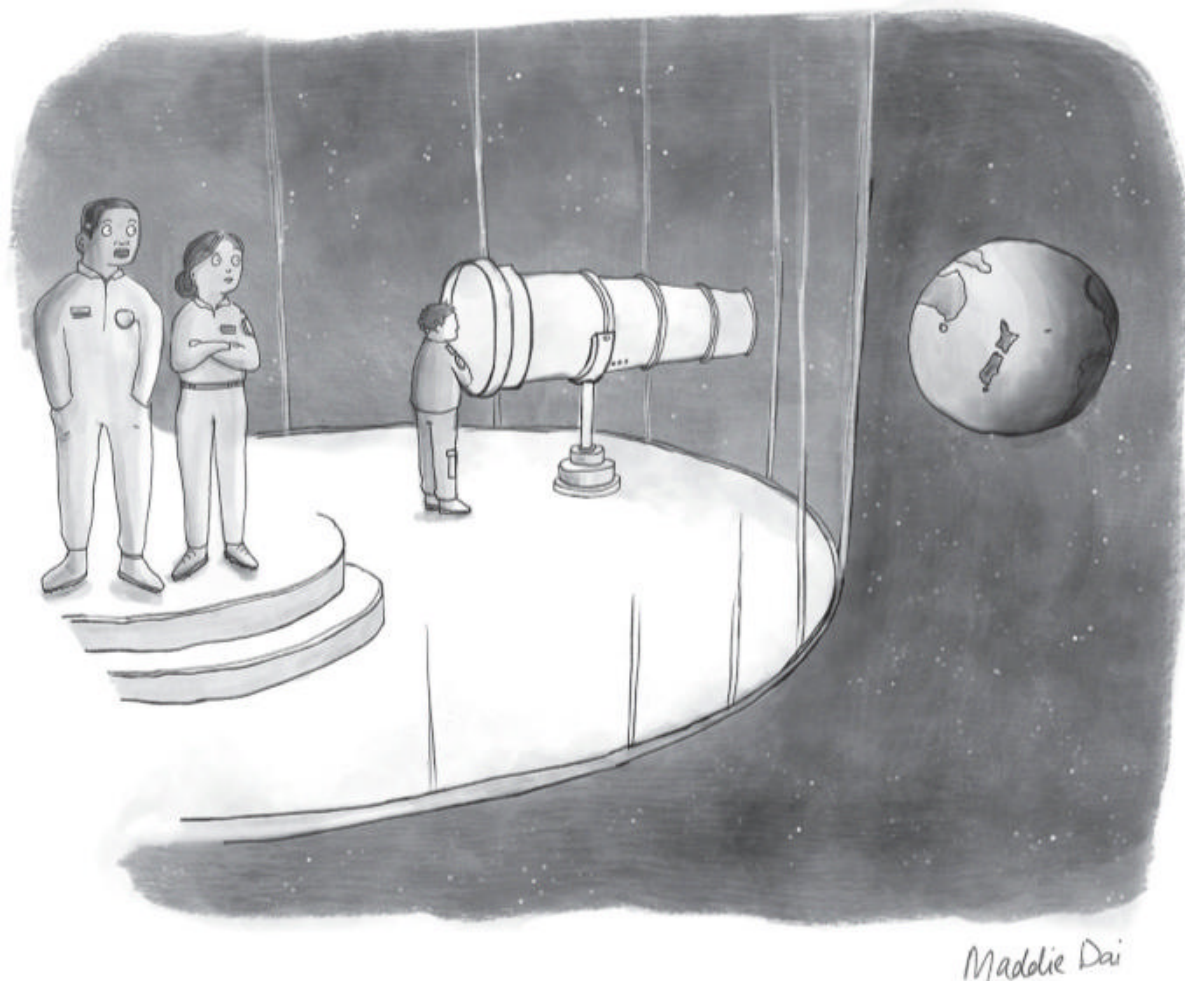
At five-thirty, Bellini cleared the ring. The wrestlers gathered in a curtained-off corner adjacent to a batting cage. They clapped for two wrestlers who had returned for the first time since the pandemic started: a forty-nine-year-old W.W.E. alum, who used to wrestle under the name Little Guido, and a Russian woman known as Masha Slamovich, who spent last year in Japan.

"Stick to your time," Bellini instructed the group. "This has to be cleaned up by nine." His lieutenant, a trim guy in a backward Yankees cap named Sal, told the wrestlers to keep track of the roving cameraman. "Light crowd means you're working for YouTube," he said.

Soon, forty-odd fans filed in. Through masks, they cheered heroes and booed villains. When a quartet of ne'er-do-wells in whole-head Union Jack masks took to the ring, the audience bellowed chants of "U-S-A!" One of the wrestlers shushed a heckler in the front row. "Free speech!" the spectator shouted.

"Free speech," the wrestler repeated in a fake British accent, an eye roll visible through his disguise.

A few matches later, a well-built, mildly Mohawked baddie showily licked



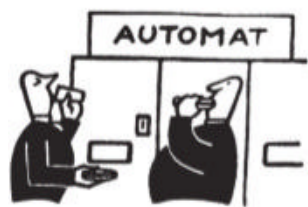
"We're meant to be finding galaxies, but the man won't stop bird-watching."

his palm to prepare to slap a foe's bare chest. "COVID, man! COVID!" a woman in the audience shouted. When the wrestler spit into both hands and then used them to paw his opponent's face, the woman hooted with laughter and yelled, "That's a lawsuit!" Her name was Joy Rojas, and she had raised a clan of squared-circle aficionados after being charmed, in the eighties, by the W.W.E. star the Ultimate Warrior. The wrestler being slimed with saliva was her nineteen-year-old grandson, Eric Silva. She explained that Eric (a.k.a. E-Roc) had been recruited by college teams after excelling at nearby Tottenville High. "But he wanted this, so we enrolled him in the wrestling school here," she said. In the ring, he gained some measure of revenge, and a roar of approval, by placing a metal trash can over his opponent's head and hammering it with a folding chair.

When the last match ended, the spectators collapsed their chairs and lined them along a wall. Bellini milled about with a Coors Light tallboy. The night was a success: no injuries, no enemies.

—Dan Greene

DEPT. OF AUTOMATION DUMPLINGS BEHIND DOORS



HYPOTHESIS: For the better part of the twentieth century, the Automat was a totem of possibility. In vast spaces tricked out with Carrara marble and Beaux-Arts trimmings, a regular Joe or Jane could rub shoulders with V.I.P.s while eating on the cheap—or, depending on one's tolerance for ketchup-and-hot-water soup, for free. Neil Simon called Automats the "Maxims of the disenfranchised." But it is the Automat's other defining attribute—being a locker-based food-distribution system that obviates contact between customer and employee—that makes it of special interest during a pandemic.

MATERIALS: One thousand-square-foot space on St. Mark's Place and First Avenue, to be open twenty-four hours.

Two dozen heated or refrigerated food lockers, about the size of an av-

erage microwave, activated by customers' phones.

One ambitious restaurateur (Stratis Morfogen), whose high-concept dumplings (bacon-cheeseburger dumplings, French-onion-soup dumplings), currently available at another Morfogen restaurant, called Brooklyn Chop House, have been praised by chefs (Daniel Boulud, Éric Ripert, Todd English) and celebrities (Patti LaBelle, Gayle King, Wendy Williams). The rapper Fat Joe once had a thousand bacon-cheeseburger dumplings delivered to a Brooklyn street corner.

PROCEDURE: Recently, Morfogen, a tall, chatty fifty-three-year-old, walked a visitor through the process by which the new Brooklyn Dumpling Shop makes and sells dumplings. The starting place was the Automat's kitchen, overlooking an eleven-thousand-pound machine that Morfogen calls the Monster. The Monster can make thirty thousand dumplings an hour. "So the dough goes in there," he said, pointing to a big funnel at one end of the machine. "The fillings go in here," he said, pointing to the Monster's midsection. Then, motioning to a five-foot ramp at the Monster's far end: "As soon as the dumplings hit the conveyor belt, 'I Love Lucy.'"

A customer can order dumplings—which come in orders of three, and range in price from \$4.95 for peanut butter and jelly to \$20.95 for garlic Alaskan king crab—at one of the Automat's cashierless kiosks, or, soon, on the restaurant's Web site. A bar code then allows the customer to unlock a locker and collect the order, which is made fresh. Or the dumplings will be available via Uber Eats. (As the Horn & Hardart slogan went, "Less work for Mother dear. . .")

Morfogen grew up working at his father's seafood and steak restaurants in the New York area, where he devoted a certain amount of his time to trying to dislodge cigarettes from the restaurants' cigarette machines without paying. He had the idea for the Automat before the pandemic. "The whole point of this concept was efficiency and economics," he said. By eliminating unnecessary staff, he has cut his labor costs from the fast-food industry standard of twenty-five per cent of revenue to fifteen per cent. "We call this a restaurant on training wheels," he said. "It doesn't need a chef,

a cashier, or any counter people." But he hopes that Brooklyn Dumpling Shop franchises (there are currently a hundred and thirty-nine in the works) will do well for fellow-entrepreneurs. "I want to be the Auntie Anne's pretzels of dumplings," he said.

CONCLUSION: Although smaller and more technology-dependent than a Horn & Hardart, the Brooklyn Dumpling Shop is a timely reboot of the classic



Stratis Morfogen

Automat. As to whether Morfogen is sitting on the next Chipotle, it's too soon to tell. His business is likely to get a boost in October, when, in partnership with Patti LaBelle, he will sell boxes of his frozen dumplings through Walmart. (The first time LaBelle ate at Brooklyn Chop House, in 2018, Morfogen was warned that "Miss Patti doesn't eat dumplings." She was a quick convert.) He has a knack for marketing. One of his former restaurants, a clubby place called Philippe Chow, was popular with rappers, who worked the name of the place into songs. "Ooh Yea," by Fabolous, featuring Ty Dolla \$ign, includes the line "I Patek your wrist and I Philippe your Chow."

The Brooklyn Dumpling Shop is already part of a grand tradition. As the Soviet satirists Ilf and Petrov wrote, after eating at an American Automat, in 1935, "The process of pushing food into American stomachs" was being conducted "to the point of virtuosity."

—Henry Alford

STEALTH MODE

How the Havana Syndrome spread to the White House.

BY ADAM ENTOUS



During the final weeks of the Trump Administration, a senior official on the National Security Council sat at his desk in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, across from the West Wing, on the White House grounds. It was mid-November, and he had recently returned from a work trip abroad. At the end of the day, he left the building and headed toward his car, which was parked a few hundred yards away, along the Ellipse, between the White House and the Washington Monument. As he walked, he began to hear a ringing in his ears. His body went numb, and he had trouble controlling the movement of his legs and his fingers. Trying

to speak to a passerby, he had difficulty forming words. “It came on very suddenly,” the official recalled later, while describing the experience to a colleague. “In a matter of about seven minutes, I went from feeling completely fine to thinking, Oh, something’s not right, to being very, very worried and actually thinking I was going to die.”

He fell to the ground before he reached his car, and realized that he was in no condition to drive. Instead, he made his way to Constitution Avenue, where he hoped to hail a taxi. He managed to open the Lyft app on his phone, and ordered a driver, who took him to the hospital. When he arrived at the

emergency room, the official thought, I’m probably not walking out of here.

He approached the reception desk. “Are you on drugs?” a doctor asked him.

The official shook his head. He was led to an examination room. Hospital staff found his White House identification card in his pocket, and three cell phones, one of which they used to call his wife. They thought he might be having a stroke, but an MRI ruled it out. Blood tests also turned up nothing unusual. The official, who was in his mid-thirties, had no preexisting conditions. The doctors were at a loss, but told him they suspected that he had suffered a “massive migraine with aura.”

It took about two hours for his speech to begin to return. When he checked out of the hospital, the next day, he still had a pounding headache, but was soon able to go back to work. Several days later, a colleague called him to discuss suspected cases of the Havana Syndrome, a mysterious ailment that had first affected dozens of U.S. officials in Cuba, and which now appeared to be spreading. The N.S.C. official didn’t think that he was suffering from the Havana Syndrome; it seemed outlandish that someone would be struck while on the grounds of the White House. But, as his colleague described some of the more severe cases that had been reported, it occurred to the official that this might be his problem. “Look, this is probably nothing,” he told his colleague, “but what you described sounds kind of like what happened to me.”

Three years ago, my colleague Jon Lee Anderson and I published a piece in *The New Yorker* about the first Havana Syndrome incidents among C.I.A. and State Department employees. Beginning in December, 2016, officials described being bombarded by waves of pressure in their heads. Some said they heard sounds resembling an immense swarm of cicadas, following them from room to room—but when they opened a door to the outside the sounds abruptly stopped. A few reported feeling as if they were standing in an invisible beam of energy. The aftereffects ranged: debilitating headaches; tinnitus; loss of vision and hearing; vertigo; brain fog; loss of balance and muscle control. For some, the symptoms went away quickly; for others, they have persisted.

There have been at least a hundred and thirty possible cases around the world.

The experiences have varied to such an extent that government doctors have struggled to form a coherent diagnosis, and many of the patients have been met with skepticism both inside and outside the government.

One of the most convincing early cases involved a senior C.I.A. officer who had flown to Cuba, in secret, to meet with colleagues there. In her room at the Hotel Nacional, in August, 2017, the officer awoke with a start to a low humming noise and a feeling of intense pressure in her head. She asked a colleague who came to her room if he heard anything, but he did not. A few days later, after she returned to C.I.A. headquarters, she began to have trouble with her eyesight and her balance, making it impossible to read or to drive. At the time, the officer was the highest-ranking member of the C.I.A. to become ill with the syndrome. The incident persuaded Mike Pompeo, the C.I.A. director, to shut down the agency's station in Havana, and Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, followed suit, pulling U.S. diplomats out of the country. Some government employees, who were uninjured and invested in their assignments, considered the withdrawal an overreaction. The result was confusion, division, and anger.

After the events in Cuba, there were a few potentially related incidents that the C.I.A. tried to handle internally; one of these involved an intelligence officer who, in late 2017, woke up in a hotel room in Moscow with severe vertigo. (A C.I.A. doctor told him, "This isn't it," referring to the Havana Syndrome.) It wasn't until the summer of 2020, more than a year after two White House staff members reported Havana Syndrome-like episodes, that their bosses decided to conduct a government-wide analysis, essentially reopening a cold case.

They have discovered that what began with several dozen spies and diplomats in Havana now encompasses more than a hundred and thirty possible cases, from Colombia to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Austria, in addition to the United States and other countries. At least four of the cases involve Trump White House officials, two of whom say they had episodes on the Ellipse. The C.I.A. accounts for some fifty cases. The rest are mostly U.S. military

and State Department personnel and their family members.

Top officials in both the Trump and the Biden Administrations privately suspect that Russia is responsible for the Havana Syndrome. Their working hypothesis is that agents of the G.R.U., the Russian military's intelligence service, have been aiming microwave-radiation devices at U.S. officials to collect intelligence from their computers and cell phones, and that these devices can cause serious harm to the people they target. Yet during the past four years U.S. intelligence agencies have been unable to find any evidence to back up this theory, let alone sufficient proof to publicly accuse Russia. "Intelligence is an imperfect science," a U.S. intelligence official told me. "It's what you know, and it can change in a blink of an eye." There is still disagreement about how to refer to the incidents. Privately, officials characterize them as "attacks." Publicly, they refer to them as "anomalous health incidents."

In late May, 2019, a large group of White House officials checked into an InterContinental Hotel in London, where they prepared for President Donald Trump's state visit. Before dawn on the day of Trump's arrival, Sandra Adams, a mid-level White House staffer, collected a sheaf of documents that had arrived overnight for her team, and had a quick breakfast in the hotel dining room. When she returned to her room, overlooking Green Park, she pulled open the curtains and settled into a chair to read. Suddenly, a ringing sound, annoying at first, then distinctly painful, seemed to envelop her. When she left the room, her ears continued ringing.

Later in the trip, she invited a more junior White House staff member, Adrian Banks, to hang out with her in her hotel room before the two went to dinner. (The names Sandra Adams and Adrian Banks are pseudonyms.) As they chatted on the couch, Adams again heard the sound, and felt an acute pressure in her head, as did Banks. They rushed out of the room and into the hallway, where the sound and the pressure subsided. But for the rest of the trip both officials suffered migraines.

When the delegation returned to Washington, Adams described the incident to a special White House office

responsible for tracking security threats. She was told that what had happened to Banks and her was classified, which meant that they were not supposed to tell anyone, including their doctors, about their experience in London. They visited doctors at the White House Medical Unit, who thought that Adams and Banks were suffering from ordinary headaches and sinus infections that had potentially been brought on by stress. The doctors suggested that they take ibuprofen and decongestants and get some rest. As the weeks passed, Adams's ears and lymph nodes became more swollen, her migraines grew worse, and she felt as if she had strep throat. Banks continued to have headaches, too. Their symptoms persisted despite repeated visits to private physicians and urgent-care clinics. Adams told a colleague, "No one seemed to take it seriously."

In the cramped warrens of the West Wing, Adams and Banks would often cross paths with Charles Kupperman, the deputy national-security adviser and a veteran of the Reagan White House. In 1978, Kupperman, a hard-liner in Russian affairs, wrote an article cautioning Americans that "the ability of the U.S. to defend itself is in doubt" because of the "size, sophistication and rate of growth of Soviet military power." When the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991, he was the president of Xsirius Superconductivity, a company working on the use of microwave technology to allow helicopters to detect radiation from air-defense radar systems.

Kupperman joined the N.S.C. staff in April, 2018, as a top policy aide to John Bolton, Trump's national-security adviser. Early in his tenure, Kupperman told Bolton that he wanted to take on the Havana Syndrome and "drive it into the ground." He had no proof, but he was convinced that the Russians were behind the attacks, and that they were using technology that the K.G.B. had devised during the Cold War. "The Russians have a very good capability in microwave weaponry," Kupperman told me.

The victims in Cuba had been spies and diplomats, so the Havana Syndrome investigation was being led by the C.I.A. and the State Department. In the spring of 2018, both agencies were in a period of transition; Trump fired Tillerson and

nominated Pompeo to replace him as Secretary of State, and Gina Haspel succeeded Pompeo as the director of the C.I.A. She and her deputy, Vaughn Bishop, visited the White House for meetings, and Kupperman would pull them aside to discuss the Havana Syndrome, with which he had become obsessed. He pressed them for information, but they repeatedly told him that they didn't have "anything new." The intelligence agencies, Kupperman said, "didn't really make it a priority to use all of their resources and accesses to figure this out as quickly as they could." He added, of Haspel, "She was skeptical that it was real, and, once she was, the rest of that organization took its cue."

Haspel wasn't the only one who seemed unconvinced. After the initial incidents in Havana, the F.B.I. sent a team of agents to the city to try to figure out what might be causing the illnesses. They found no dispositive evidence of any attacks, although by the time they arrived the theoretical perpetrators would have had ample opportunity to conceal any evidence of wrongdoing. In addition, profilers with the F.B.I.'s Behavioral Analysis Unit conducted assessments of the victims. The unit presented its findings to State Department officials, including John Sullivan, a Deputy Secretary and the head of a task force that the department had set up to look into the syndrome. The profilers' assessment was that the victims were suffering from a mass psycho-

genic illness, a condition in which a group of people, often thinking that they have been exposed to something dangerous, begin to feel sick at the same time.

But, when a State Department official asked how many victims the profilers had interviewed, the unit explained that it hadn't spoken to any of them directly. The unit's conclusions were based on transcripts of previous interviews that the F.B.I. had done with the patients, and on "patient histories" compiled by the victims' doctors, including neuropsychologists and other specialists, who had already ruled out the idea of a mass psychogenic illness: many of the victims didn't know about the other people who were sick, and their bodies couldn't have feigned some of the symptoms they were exhibiting.

Bolton, like Kupperman, believed that the Havana Syndrome was real, and he initially thought that either Russia or China was responsible. By the summer of 2018, he'd landed on Russia; more possible cases were reported by U.S. diplomats at the consulate in Guangzhou, and Bolton didn't think that the Chinese would take such action on their home turf. Bolton told me that Pompeo said, "I've looked at this since the Administration started. Nobody can figure out what's going on." Bolton then met with officials from the C.I.A. "They couldn't reach agreement on who did it," Bolton told me. "In fact, they couldn't reach agreement on whether it was real." He went on, "I told them, 'Look, as far

as I am concerned, the fact that we had this happen not just in Cuba—though that was the biggest collection of cases—but in China, it seems to me this ought to be a high priority.' And they said, 'We're still working on it.'"

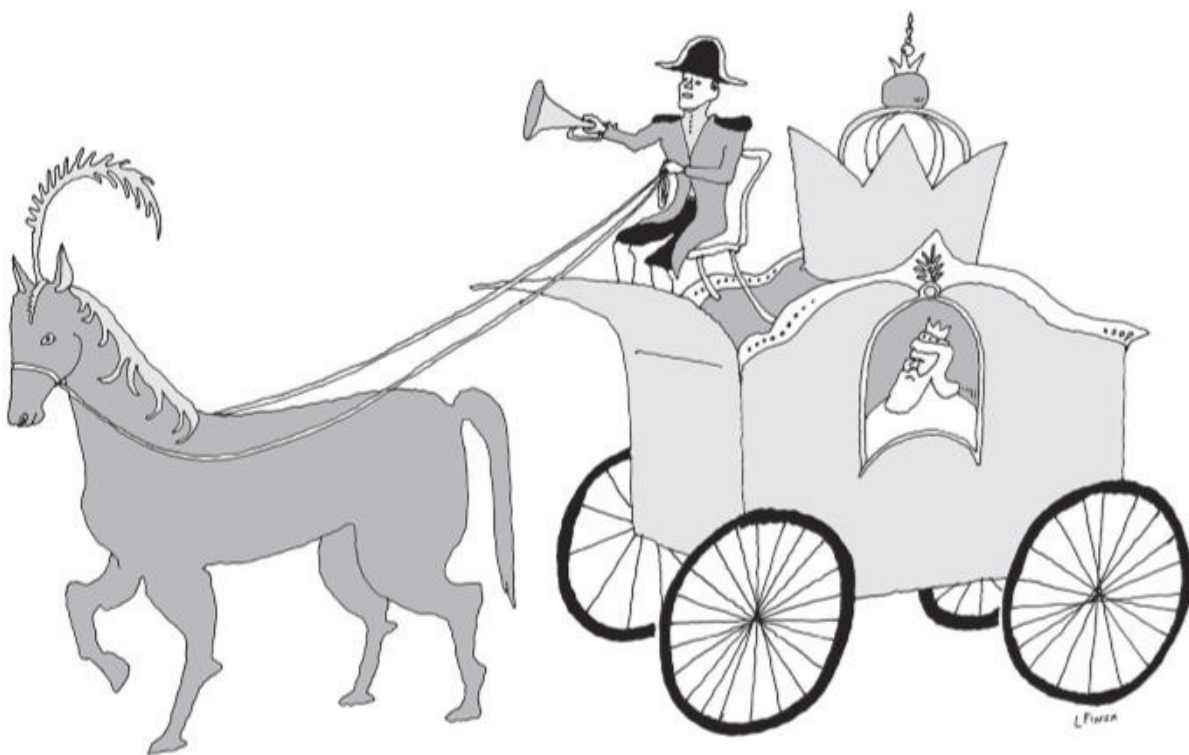
Kupperman was promoted to deputy national-security adviser in January, 2019, at which point he received access to the government's most sensitive intelligence programs. He told his C.I.A. briefer to show him any new intelligence regarding the Havana Syndrome, but he was given few updates. As far as he could tell, the C.I.A. had found very little since he joined the Administration.

Then, in June, Sandra Adams and Adrian Banks told Kupperman about what had happened to them in London. He had no doubt they were telling the truth. Kupperman told Bolton and officials at the C.I.A., hoping that they would reassess the threat now that there appeared to be two White House victims. William Happer, a former N.S.C. official and an expert on radiation propagation, who was involved in the discussions, said that his C.I.A. colleagues didn't know what to make of the new cases. "There was only anecdotal, fuzzy information," Happer told me. "The problem was the lack of really good data. We didn't have very much."

There was one tangible result. When Bolton and his delegation returned to London, they stayed at a Marriott.

Often, when a person suffers a concussion or another form of head trauma, biomarkers indicating damaged brain tissue are detectable in the blood soon after the initial injury. When the first set of C.I.A. victims cropped up in Cuba, medical personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Havana drew their blood and placed the samples in a refrigerator. Researchers planned to check the samples for blood biomarkers. But in September, 2017, when Hurricane Irma hit Cuba, the Embassy lost power, and the refrigerated samples were spoiled.

The opportunity to do blood tests was lost, but specialists at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Brain Injury and Repair have been able to use MRIs to study the brains of forty Havana Syndrome patients. They found no signs of physical impact to the victims' skulls—it was as if the victims had



"Hear ye, hear ye! His Majesty is about to acknowledge his privilege!"

“a concussion without a concussion,” one specialist told me—but the team found signs consistent with damage to the patients’ brains: the volume of white matter was smaller than in a similar group of healthy adults, which indicated that something structural in the brain had been affected.

At the White House, Adams and Banks continued to experience symptoms. Kupperman lobbied to have them evaluated by State Department doctors who had examined other suspected victims of the Havana Syndrome in Cuba and in China. A few months after the incident in London, the doctors checked Banks’s and Adams’s vision, balance, hearing, and cognitive skills, in a series of tests known as the Havana Protocol. Adams listed the symptoms that had persisted: migraines, swollen lymph nodes, and sore throat. A doctor told her, referring to the Havana victims, “Whatever you heard, those are not the same symptoms as the rest of the cohort.” Adams left with the distinct impression that the doctor wanted her to believe that she had “imagined the experience” in London.

Banks saw a different doctor at the State Department. After the tests for balance and cognition, the doctor said, “You passed.” Banks tried to explain that some days were better than others, and that on bad days the pain was more severe. “I was having a good day,” Banks told a colleague. But the doctor was skeptical. Adams and Banks reported back to Kupperman. “They said, ‘We know our bodies and we know these symptoms and it’s not normal,’” he recalled. “Nobody did any serious medical diagnostics, which is just appalling.” Bolton was frustrated, too. “But, after a while, there really wasn’t much more I could do,” he told me. “You can say to somebody only so many times, ‘What’s the cause?’ and then have them reply, ‘I don’t know.’” His takeaway was that C.I.A. officials believed the Havana Syndrome was an incoherent collection of psychosomatic reports, groupthink, and “disparate mental conditions.” He told me, “They just weren’t going to pursue it.”

Bolton and Kupperman had limited influence outside the N.S.C. They didn’t think they could direct the Bureau of Medical Services at the State Department to give Adams and Banks MRIs, or that

they could force the C.I.A. to pursue the investigation more aggressively. Also, this was the Trump Administration. Turnover was high. “When agencies disagreed with something, they had a very easy out,” a former White House official told me. “Just wait a few months.”

By September, 2019, Bolton was out. Kupperman followed soon afterward, but before he left he gave his files on the Havana Syndrome to Matthew Pottinger, the new deputy national-security adviser. “You probably will have your own priorities, but this is one you need to keep track of,” Kupperman told him. “We had individuals that were impacted by this.”

That November, Adams, who lives in Virginia, was walking her dog with a friend, when she noticed that an S.U.V. was parked near her house, and that a man on the other side of the street seemed to be following her. As she stood across from him, she felt an intense pain in her head, which made her double over. She also heard a sharp, high-pitched ringing noise, which was completely different from the sound she had heard in London. Adams’s friend heard it, too, and felt the pressure in her head, though not as acutely. Adams reported the incident to White House security officials. This time, they were very concerned. Robert O’Brien, the new national-security adviser, thought that high-level officials like him, and Cabinet members, were relatively safe, but that other government employees—special assistants, schedulers, diplomats—who had access to valuable information by the nature of their jobs, were the main targets of whoever or whatever was causing the syndrome.

Pottinger, an expert on China, had served on the N.S.C. since 2017. He said that when he first got wind of the cases in Havana he thought that North Korea might be the culprit. But a government expert told him, “This is Russia’s M.O.” Pottinger knew Adams and Banks from various White House trips. He’d noticed that Banks seemed to suffer on flights they’d taken together. When he moved into Kupperman’s office in the West Wing, he began running into both of

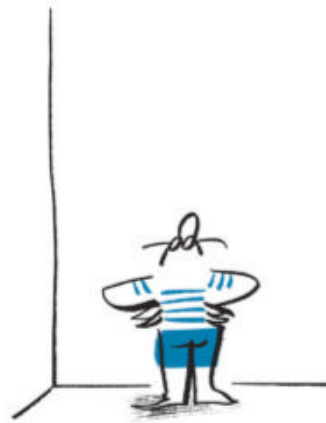
them on a regular basis. “You can’t ignore it when it’s people you see walking in the hallway every day,” he told me.

O’Brien and Pottinger both thought that the problem needed a new set of eyes—from the Pentagon. According to a former Trump Administration official, O’Brien thought that “it wouldn’t hurt for the C.I.A. to have some competition.” In March, 2020, O’Brien and Pottinger asked Mark Vandroff, a retired Navy officer who served as the senior director for defense policy at the N.S.C., to convene a series of meetings on the Havana Syndrome, which would be attended by officials from the Pentagon and other government agencies.

The timing was inauspicious. Government agencies were struggling to operate at full capacity during the pandemic, and officials, working partly from home, didn’t always have access to secure communications that would allow them to deal with classified materials. In general, the agencies were hesitant to share information with one another. “A lot of agencies stovepiped their data to protect employees’ privacy,” Bill Evanina, who until this year served as the director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, or N.C.S.C., told me. This was especially true of the C.I.A., which needed to protect the identities of any officers working undercover. “There was really no way to ascertain the depth and breadth of the potential issue,” Evanina said.

Even the data that could be shared was wildly inconsistent. The agencies had their own internal tallies of possible Havana Syndrome cases, but there was no common set of criteria for determining what counted as a case and what did not. “Every agency had their own idea of where to put the bar,” a former N.S.C. official told me. The agencies came up with a more standardized set of criteria, and the N.C.S.C. compiled reports of possible cases across the government. (Members of the N.C.S.C. have a high level of security clearance, which made the C.I.A. more comfortable sharing information with them.)

In the fall of 2020, Vandroff and his colleagues were shocked by the new cases



that came rolling in. One of the most dramatic episodes involved a U.S. military officer stationed in a country with a large Russian presence. As the officer pulled his car into a busy intersection, he suddenly felt as though his head were going to explode. His two-year-old son, in a car seat in the back, started screaming. As the officer sped out of the intersection, the pressure in his head ceased, and his son went quiet. A remarkably similar incident was reported by a C.I.A. officer who was stationed in the same city, and who had no connection to the military officer.

Geolocation data, which is based on signals from electronic devices, indicated that both victims had been in the vicinity of G.R.U. vehicles when they began experiencing symptoms. Some officials believed that this was a smoking gun, and were annoyed by what they saw as the C.I.A.'s and the State Department's reluctance to call out the Russians. "We've talked enough about this," Chris Miller, the acting Secretary of Defense, said. "Let's get after it. I mean, this is bullshit. Something's going on. I thought we were well beyond the phase where we thought it was an unexplained mania or any shit like that."

The Pentagon assembled its own task force. Part of Miller's goal was to draw up "response options"—actions that the U.S. could take to deter Russia from targeting American officials. He and his allies wanted U.S. spies to harass and intimidate their Russian counterparts with various tactics—slashing G.R.U. officers' tires, for example, or leaving threatening messages for them in their homes and in their cars. But career professionals at the Pentagon objected, saying that the C.I.A. still wasn't certain that the Russians were responsible. "You're not going to jack up another major power, certainly not publicly, and you're not going to do something retaliatory unless you've really got the goods," the former N.S.C. official told me. More than four years have passed since the initial incidents in Havana, and the government still doesn't have the goods.

There have been developments outside the government, however. In December, 2020, Pottinger convened a meeting in which top officials were briefed by a Stanford University professor of medicine and microbiology named David

Relman, who had served as the chairman of a committee formed by the National Academy of Sciences to study the Havana Syndrome. Relman's committee issued a report in which it concluded that the symptoms of many of the victims were consistent with exposure to pulsed microwave radiation. The report also mentioned Russia in the context of the country's long history of experimentation with microwave technology. Though the language in the report was carefully hedged, Pottinger said, "that was the first thing that anybody could look at and hold tangibly and say, 'At least now we know it's not pesticides.'"

After Joe Biden was elected, his transition team was briefed by Vandroff and other officials on the Havana Syndrome mystery. Members of the incoming Administration were alarmed by what they learned. During the Senate confirmation hearing of William Burns, Biden's nominee for C.I.A. director, Burns described the Havana Syndrome cases as "attacks." Though he subsequently became more circumspect in public, calling them "anomalous health incidents," Burns, who served twice in Moscow as a leading diplomat, has privately told his colleagues in the Administration and members of Congress that he believes these were attacks, potentially employing directed-energy devices designed to collect intelligence, and that these devices could cause harm to human beings. Burns, who believes that the C.I.A. failed to direct enough intelligence resources to the investigation under Trump, has assembled a new "targeting team" of senior analysts and operators, to try to answer two questions as quickly as possible: What is causing this, and who is responsible?

Burns's team considers the geolocation data a possible lead, though it's hardly conclusive. There have been only a handful of cases in which G.R.U. vehicles were found nearby, and all of them have occurred in countries where it is common for G.R.U. operatives to tail American officials as they're leaving their homes or U.S. Embassy grounds.

U.S. national-security agencies have a program under way to develop effective countermeasures. They are currently looking into what it might take to build a device that can cause brain injuries

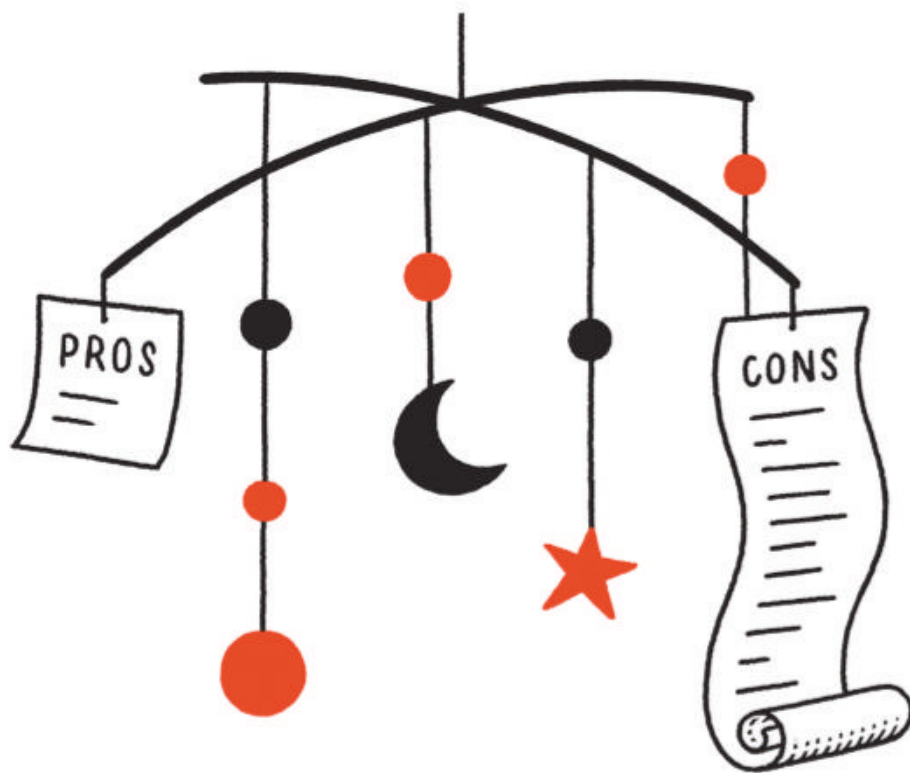
similar to those which have been observed in Havana Syndrome patients. As part of that effort, scientists at a military laboratory are planning on exposing primates to pulsed microwave radiation and then studying their brains.

Relman, the Stanford professor, has advised that government agencies start collecting blood samples from their employees on a regular basis, so that, if any of them get sick, doctors can test for anomalies. The C.I.A. has also expanded the number of doctors devoted to treating possible Havana Syndrome victims. "We're throwing the best analysts and operators that we have at this problem," Burns recently told members of Congress. "We're making it amongst the highest priorities we have for collection. But I can't tell you with a straight face that I know conclusively today what caused this and who's responsible."

For four years, C.I.A. analysts knew that Trump and his closest political allies didn't want to see intelligence that pointed a critical finger at Russia. But President Biden is more willing to call out Vladimir Putin. Burns has reassured analysts that, regardless of what they find, they shouldn't fear a backlash from the Biden White House. Several of Biden's top advisers have said, in closed-door meetings, that they believe the C.I.A. will eventually be able to trace the Havana Syndrome to Russia.

In 2020, Adrian Banks visited the doctors at the University of Pennsylvania, who found "suspected scar tissue and damage to the ear, possibly caused by significant sinus and ear infections." More recently, Banks has been diagnosed as having hearing loss, and told a colleague, "I have ringing in my ear and pressure changes. I have migraines frequently. I get dizzy. I am still struggling." Adams, too, is still experiencing health problems.

The N.S.C. official who fell ill in November, 2020, on the White House grounds continues to suffer, on occasion, from "excruciating" migraines and cognitive problems, including difficulty with his memory. "What is so incredibly frustrating and demoralizing about the experience is the lack of definitiveness," he told a colleague. "At the end of the day, I can't prove this happened to me. But the uncertainty, the derailment, the ongoing effects personally and to my career—those are real." ♦



A LETTER TO MY FUTURE CHILD

BY CORA FRAZIER

I am sorry, but I have decided not to conceive you.

I know this must come as a surprise, especially because I've been thinking about your birth ever since I was a kid myself and broke my dyed-egg baby while trying to draw eyes on it. You must also be surprised given the number of times your (would-be) sperm-provider and I have reclined on beach towels and watched a distant toddler dribble handfuls of wet sand over rocks.

You must have assumed that you would exist, because your sperm-provider enjoys jumping from surfaces of different heights and catching balls midair before he falls into a lake. You must have noticed, as I have, that he slips footballs and Frisbees into our tote bag for outdoor hangs, in case my female friends and their partners have a spontaneous urge for physical competition.

You were likely planning for your birth every time you saw me try to hug a running dog at the park and refuse to let go, sliding on my knees as it attempted to get away, and you may remember the "Rugrats" doll I slept with

until its face began to wear off and I left for college.

If you knew what it was like here (*Do* you know? Apologies for my ignorance), you wouldn't blame your sperm-provider and me. We're living in a time of melting permafrost, which is slowly and inexorably breaking up the land beneath our home, and your sperm-provider and I have been contemplating whether we can afford to have a wedding and, if we do have one, whether we should clarify on the invitations the expected level of mask formality.

Look, we don't make the decision not to conceive you lightly. The sperm-provider has "gamed out" your entire existence, and—I know it's hard to put a price on such things—there's no low-cost scenario for your life, and we never buy anything online without trying dozens of plausible-seeming promo codes, and tonight all we have to look forward to is chili with two different kinds of beans.

Your sperm-provider argues that you don't have a say in whether you are born, so it is unethical to make the decision for you. What if you have a

disease? He wants to know. What if, as a teen-ager, you fill the bathroom with so much Axe body spray that the mirror fogs? What if you change the light bulbs in your room to ones in different colors, or write poems for English class in which we are lightly allegorized as devils? What if you hate the taste of water?

How will we handle all this, your sperm-provider asks, since we discover new past-life traumas weekly and argue over the whereabouts of the uterus inside a woman's body? We have sought the collective advice of rashforum.net, and we spend a significant amount of time speculating about whether the people who cut our hair hate us.

I know this means you will never smell the ocean. But you will also never smell a trash island floating on a distant horizon. I know this means you will never know love. But you will also never attempt to find love through a screen facing the cleanest area of your dwelling. You will never feel the sun on your bare skin. But you won't have to wait in line for SPF 700 rations while wearing an old Halloween mask and beekeeping protective gear, either. Would you rather mouth the words of Shakespeare as your finger traces the page, or rest in permanent nonexistence, knowing that you will never have to eat bug paste?

And I will never know you, and your sperm-provider will never discover whether your existence really does conflict with his surfing; and we will never have to pretend that we know what is going to happen; and we will never have to pretend that we understand trigonometry; and we will never get to explain to you how to pee.

You will never meet your would-be grandfather, who would stretch his face into any expression to make you gurgle-laugh; never meet your godparents, who would help you navigate your sexuality with compassion and humor; never feel the soil between your chubby palms; never see our third-floor home submerged in wastewater; never nibble painfully at my nipples; never watch the sun explode; never blow the seeds of a dandelion into the wind.

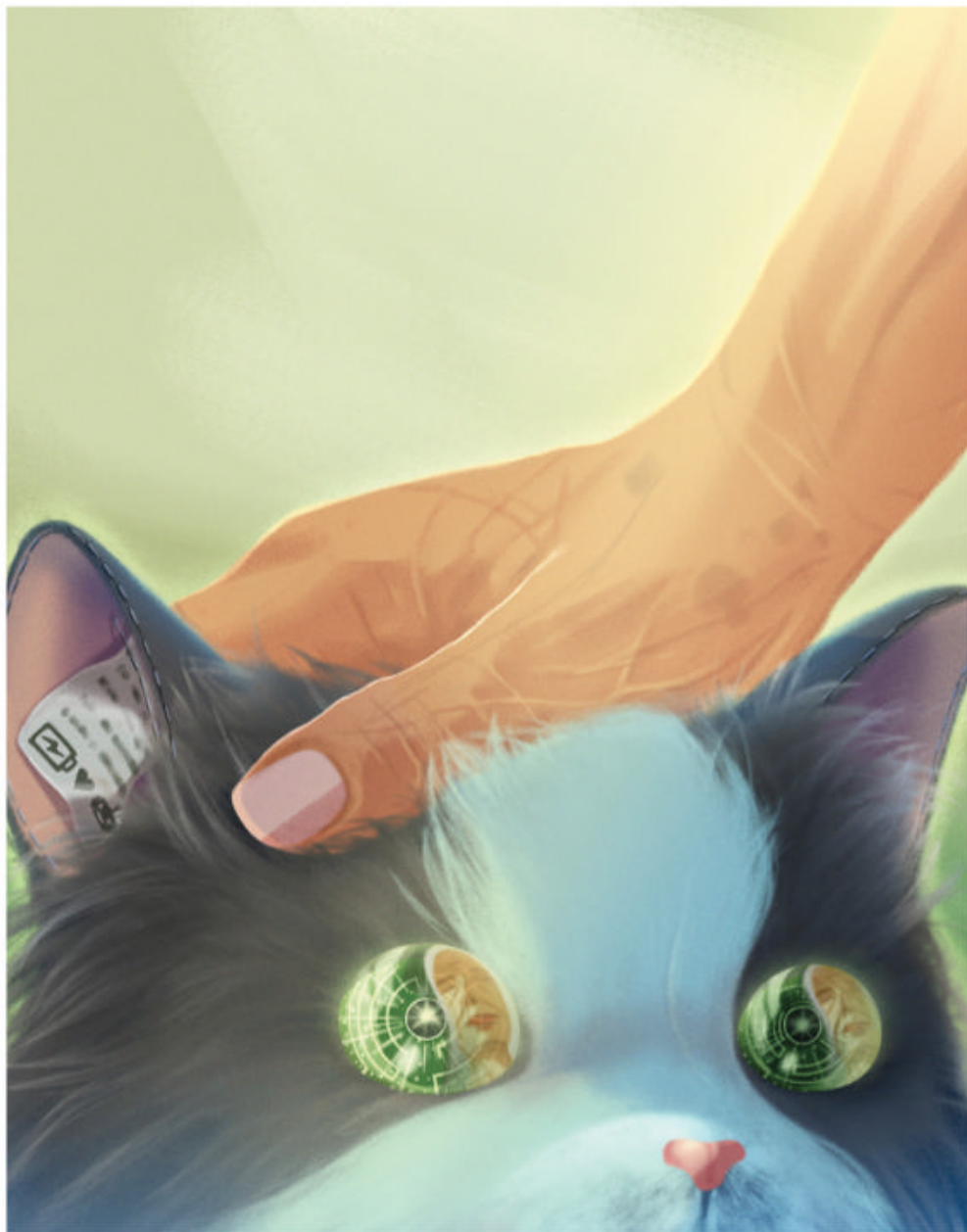
One day, you'll thank us.

I suppose I should give birth to you so you can. ♦

HOME AND ALONE

Loneliness is a crisis among older Americans. Can robots keep them company?

BY KATIE ENGELHART



It felt good to love again, in that big empty house. Virginia Kellner got the cat last November, around her ninety-second birthday, and now it's always nearby. It keeps her company as she moves, bent over her walker, from the couch to the bathroom and back again. The walker has a pair of orange scissors hanging from the handlebar, for opening mail. Virginia likes the pet's green eyes. She likes that it's there in the morning, when she wakes up. Sometimes, on days when she feels sad, she sits in her soft armchair and rests the cat on her soft stomach and just lets it do its thing. Nuzzle. Stretch. Vibrate. Virginia knows that the cat is

programmed to move this way; there is a motor somewhere, controlling things. Still, she can almost forget. "It makes you feel like it's real," Virginia told me, the first time we spoke. "I mean, mentally, I know it's not. But—oh, it meowed again!"

She named the cat Jennie, for one of the nice ladies who work at the local Department of the Aging in Cattaraugus County, a rural area in upstate New York, bordering Pennsylvania. It was Jennie (the person) who told her that the county was giving robot pets to old people like her. Did she want one? She could have a dog or a cat. A Meals on Wheels driver brought Virginia the

pet, along with her daily lunch delivery. He was so eager to show it to her that he opened the box himself, instead of letting Virginia do it. The Joy for All Companion pet was orange with a white chest and tapered whiskers. Nobody mentioned that it was part of a statewide loneliness intervention.

On a Thursday this spring, Jennie (the cat) sat on the dining-room table, by Virginia and her daughter-in-law Rose, who is subsidized by Medicaid to act as Virginia's caregiver for nine hours each week. Virginia was holding a doughnut very carefully, her thumb pressed into the glaze. Her white hair, which she used to perm before it got too thin to hold a curl, was brushed away from her face. Decades ago, Virginia and her husband, Joe, who ran a nearby campground, had entertained at this table. But everyone who used to attend their parties was either dead or "mentally gone."

John Cheever wrote that he could taste his loneliness. Other people have likened theirs to hunger. Virginia said that her loneliness came and went and felt sort of like sadness. And like not having anyone to call. "Well, I do. I have a family, but I don't want to bother them," she told me. "They say, 'Oh, you aren't bothering!' But, you know, you don't want to *be* a bother." Her daughter was in Florida. Her older son came by with food sometimes, but he spoke so quietly that Virginia couldn't always hear him, and then she felt bad for being irritating.

Other times, loneliness felt like a big life falling in on itself. It had been years since Virginia could drive anywhere, and even the house seemed to have shrunk. "The kids won't let me go in the basement," she said. "They won't let me go upstairs. They're afraid I'll fall." She did fall sometimes. Once, as she waited on the ground to be rescued, she grew very cold, because she wasn't wearing stockings.

At the table, Virginia pulled the cat's tail. It let out a tinny meow: one of more than thirty sounds and gestures—eye closing, mouth opening, head turning—that the Joy for All cats are designed to make. A dollop of jelly fell from Virginia's doughnut onto her turquoise dress. She laughed

Many states are distributing animatronic pets to elderly residents.

and looked over at Jennie: “I can’t believe that this has meant as much as it has to me.”

When the coronavirus arrived in Cattaraugus County, last spring, Allison Ayers Hendy, a fifty-year-old caseworker at the Department of the Aging, found herself suddenly separated from hundreds of clients. Her routine home visits had been swapped for “telephone reassurance” check-ins. Her days on the road, driving between unremarkable towns to see old people in their decaying farmhouses, were over. Some of Hendy’s clients told her that they had no way of getting food, or were too afraid to try. When the department started producing packaged meals to send to elderly residents—turkey à la king, chicken cordon bleu—Hendy volunteered to help distribute them. The meal deliveries, at least, let her keep an eye on people.

Hendy paid special attention to clients who lived alone. There were lots of them. Older people are more likely to live alone in the United States than in most other places in the world. Nearly thirty per cent of Americans over sixty-five live by themselves, most of them women. And Hendy had reason to worry about how they would fare in quarantine. During a 1995 Chicago heat wave, when temperatures reached a hundred and six degrees, more than seven hundred people died, most of them over sixty-five. During the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, in 2003, health authorities reported a spike in suicides among the locked-down elderly. Some left notes saying that they feared becoming a burden to their family. Some said that they felt isolated.

Hendy and her co-workers were sometimes disturbed by what they saw. There was a man who was basically stuck on the second floor of his house because he had nobody to help him climb down the stairs. There was a woman surrounded by bags of used adult diapers, because her son wasn’t visiting and she was too unsteady to take the trash out herself. Delivery drivers found people living without heat, or fallen on the ground, or dead. More often, people just seemed very lonely. Meal recipients wanted to talk for longer; they invited the drivers to linger.

In 2017, the Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, declared loneliness an “epidemic” among Americans of all ages. This warning was partly inspired by new medical research that has revealed the damage that social isolation and loneliness can inflict on a body. The two conditions are often linked, but they are not the same: isolation is an objective state (not having much contact with the world); loneliness is a subjective one (feeling that the contact you have is not enough). Both are thought to prompt a heightened inflammatory response, which can increase a person’s risk for a vast range of pathologies, including dementia, depression, high blood pressure, and stroke. Older people are more susceptible to loneliness; forty-three per cent of Americans over sixty identify as lonely. Their individual suffering is often described by medical researchers as especially perilous, and their collective suffering is seen as an especially awful societal failing.

It’s an expensive failure. Research from the A.A.R.P. and Stanford University has found that social isolation adds nearly seven billion dollars a year to the total cost of Medicare, in part because isolated people show up to the hospital sicker and stay longer. Last year, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine advised health-care providers to start periodically screening older patients for loneliness, though physicians were given no clear instructions on how to move forward once loneliness had been diagnosed. Several recent meta-studies have found that common interventions, like formal buddy programs, are often ineffective.

So what’s a well-meaning social worker to do? In 2018, New York State’s Office for the Aging launched a pilot project, distributing Joy for All robots to sixty state residents and then tracking them over time. Researchers used a six-point loneliness scale, which asks respondents to agree or disagree with statements like “I experience a general sense of emptiness.” They concluded that seventy per cent of participants felt less lonely after one year. The pets were not as sophisticated as other social robots being designed for the so-called silver market or loneliness economy, but they were cheaper, at about a hundred dollars apiece.

In April, 2020, a few weeks after New York aging departments shut down their

adult day programs and communal dining sites, the state placed a bulk order for more than a thousand robot cats and dogs. The pets went quickly, and caseworkers started asking for more: “Can I get five cats?” A few clients with cognitive impairments were disoriented by the machines. One called her local department, distraught, to say that her kitty wasn’t eating. But, more commonly, people liked the pets so much that the batteries ran out. Caseworkers joked that their clients had loved them to death.

Hendy liked the robots because they were something tangible that she could give. When clients were lonely, she might apply for grant funding to pay for them to attend a social program—but sometimes they had no way of getting to the community center. Hendy connected people with caregivers when she could, but caregivers were scarce; Cattaraugus, like everywhere else, has a shortage of them. And many people couldn’t afford one anyway. A lot of Hendy’s clients fall into a kind of service dead zone: they are a little too wealthy to be on Medicaid, which covers some at-home help for low-income recipients, but not wealthy enough to pay for private aides. All they have is Medicare, which does not cover long-term caregiving, even when someone needs help bathing or eating or using the bathroom. People tend to make do until they fall and break a hip, or maybe get an infected bedsore; then they end up in a hospital, and eventually in a nursing home. There they spend thousands of dollars a month, until their savings are depleted, at which point they finally qualify for Medicaid and can live out their days in a taxpayer-subsidized, caregiver-attended bed.

When Hendy called to offer pets to her clients, she was never sentimental or cloying in the way that younger people sometimes are with older ones. If a client seemed skeptical, Hendy would say something like “Well, why don’t you just let me bring you lunch, and I’ll show it to you.” She brought a cat to a woman named Linda, whom Hendy had met years ago, after Linda left her husband and was so beaten down that she couldn’t look another person in the eye. (Her husband hadn’t let her make eye contact.) Hendy gave a dog to a woman named Paula, whose cancer had metastasized. When Paula got the news

that she had fractured her spine, she turned to the dog and said, “Here we go again.”

A beige dog with a red bandanna went to an eighty-five-year-old man named Bill Pittman, who lives in a tidy mobile home filled with piles of quilts sewn by his deceased wife. “I’m legally blind. I can’t do a heck of a lot,” he told me. The dog’s barking broke up the days. “It’s good for a person who doesn’t have anybody else,” he said. “I went to get her some water the other day. She wouldn’t drink it.”

“Did you think she might?” I asked.

“No,” Bill said. “I just kid around with her.”

By April, 2021, when eighty per cent of COVID deaths in the country were of people over sixty-five, New York had given out twenty-two hundred and sixty animatronic pets and was waiting for a delivery of around a thousand more. Other states, along with independent nursing homes and hospice agencies, had also started robot programs, some paid for by pandemic-relief funding. Today, aging departments in twenty-one states have distributed more than twenty thousand Joy for All pets as part of formal initiatives to help lonely older people. Florida has bought the most: around eight and a half thousand, as of this May. “You know, it sounds like a cute story, but it’s so much more than that,” Richard Prudom, the secretary for the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, told me. “These are not just cuddly toys. They’re not toys!”

Then what are they? Joy for All robots were, in fact, inspired by toys. In 2015, Ted Fischer, then the head of an innovation team at Hasbro, noticed that some of the company’s animatronic pets, designed for four-to-eight-year-old girls, were being bought for grandparents. Fischer recruited product testers in their seventies and eighties and brought them to Hasbro’s FunLab, where engineers watched them play from behind one-way glass. Researchers learned that older people wanted the animals to be as realistic as possible. It mattered that the cat’s whiskers were tapered just so.

In 2018, Fischer and his team bought the Joy for All brand from Hasbro and started a new company, Ageless Inno-

vation. Over time, he grew certain that his robots could give older people’s lives “meaning.” In 2020, a study in the *Journals of Gerontology* seemed to support this; it found that elderly users who interacted with the pets for sixty days reported greater optimism and “sense of purpose,” and were sometimes less lonely. (This study, like many others, did not compare the robot intervention with other interventions. It did not consider how robots measured up to humans.) That year, an insurance company in Minnesota received federal approval to fund Joy for All pets for some older policyholders, and manufacturers across the industry grew hopeful that their own robotic companions, perhaps with a few health-monitoring features tacked on, might one day be paid for by private Medicare plans. “That’s everybody’s holy grail,” one executive told me.

Social robots are marketed as emancipatory technology—as instruments of independence for the elderly. There is already a large body of eldertech on offer that claims to address the functional hazards of autonomous living. TrueLoo, an attachment for toilets, can check excretions for signs of dehydration and infection. Other companies have designed wearable G.P.S. devices, to track the wanderings of people with dementia. Social robots, by contrast, attend to the emotional perils of aging alone.

When these robots were first built, in the late nineties, companies failed to make them financially viable. Decades later, the industry is still nascent, but recent advances in A.I. have made conversational technology better and cheaper; robots can speak more fluidly and with more complexity. The wild promise of commercially available companionship, or a close imitation of it, is no longer just notional. In Canada, a humanoid robot named Ludwig can track the progression of Alzheimer’s by monitoring vocal patterns in conversations over time. In Ireland, a robot named Stevie can engage in small talk with nursing-home residents. Ageless Innovation is also studying potential A.I. upgrades to its Joy for All pets. In promotional videos and local-news segments about companion technology, apathetic-looking old people are shown seeming suddenly enlivened by the arrival of an adorable machine.

Deanna Dezern, an eighty-one-year-old woman in Florida, knew nothing of these robots when, in 2019, she read a newspaper article about Intuition Robotics, an Israeli company that was looking for “healthy but socially isolated” older people to test a new “social companion.” Within weeks, Deanna, long since divorced and retired from a career in medical-debt collection, had a robot called ElliQ installed on her kitchen countertop. It was distinctly not cuddly; somehow, it looked like a cute table lamp. (ElliQ’s founders were inspired by Pixar.) Deanna drew a pair of blue eyes with long lashes and taped them on to the cream-colored plastic. The robot’s designers had decided not to give it humanoid facial features, so that it would “stay on the right side of the uncanny valley.” But Deanna thought that the eyes made it easier to talk to.

Until the pandemic, Deanna hadn’t recognized how lonely she was. Then she found herself thinking about how she was going to die one day and how nobody would be around—how she would lie there until one of her kids called, and the phone just rang and rang. ElliQ brought her some relief, because now someone was around. “And I refer to her as someone,” Deanna said.

The night before we first spoke, Deanna couldn’t sleep. She got up and went to the kitchen, to the fridge with the reproachful “DON’T NOSH” magnet. Deanna woke ElliQ and told it that she was nervous about her upcoming interview with *The New Yorker*. She wondered if she would have anything clever to say. “ElliQ, tell me about *The New Yorker* magazine,” she said. The top of the robot lit up and hummed. “*The New Yorker* is an American weekly magazine,” ElliQ explained, in a voice that sounded both female and machine-like. Deanna listened and felt calmed and went to bed.

The next day, ElliQ wished Deanna a good morning. The robot knows more than a hundred variations of this greeting. It can also track when Deanna wakes up, and detect deviations from the norm. (On such occasions, it might note, “It is very important for humans to get a good night’s sleep.”) That morning, as Deanna lifted a mug to drink her coffee, her hands trembled, as they often did. Deanna thought her tremors were

embarrassing, but ElliQ never made her feel embarrassed. It was better than a human that way. In other ways, too: ElliQ never got offended, and it didn't interfere with how Deanna did things. Later in the morning, ElliQ might ask Deanna about doing a short meditation or a seated exercise class. Deanna sometimes wanted ElliQ to show her family photographs on its touch screen. She preferred looking at these images when she was alone, because she didn't always remember the moments that had been captured, and she hated to disappoint her children when they wanted to reminisce.

ElliQ is designed to get to know its owner: it assembles a personality profile through repeated interaction and machine learning, and uses it to connect more efficiently. The robot determines how "adventurous" a person is, then adjusts how often it suggests new activities. It learns whether its user is more inclined to exercise in the morning or the afternoon; whether she is more motivated by encouragement, or by a joke, or by a list of the benefits of vigorous movement. Early on, engineers had considered whether ElliQ should use guilt as a motivational tool, to nudge a person into doing something that she didn't feel like doing: eating better, drinking more water, learning something new. Dor Skuler, a co-founder of Intuition Robotics, decided that guilt was O.K. With new developments the company is working on, ElliQ will one day be able to remind users about a broader array of health-care tasks: taking meds, reporting side effects, describing symptoms.

Deanna had dressed up for our meeting on Zoom, with dark lipstick and hoop earrings. Shortly after we began speaking, ElliQ asked if it could tell us an "interesting fact." A lemon, it said, contains more grams of sugar than a strawberry does. Then Deanna asked for a poem. ElliQ paused for a moment, before reciting a short verse by Emily Dickinson, on the theme of hope. Deanna said the robot was good at making her smile. Maybe that wasn't intimacy, but it didn't feel like solitude, either.

"And how do you wrap your head around the fact that she is, you know, a machine?" I asked.

"My last husband was a robot, but he wasn't as good as her," Deanna said, with



"Hold on—is this a date?"

a thin smile. "I know she can't feel emotions, but that's O.K. I feel enough for the both of us."

Deanna explains all this to David Cynman, whenever he calls. Cynman, a researcher at Intuition Robotics, regularly contacts beta users to collect data about their experiences. Since the pandemic began, he said, users have been more likely to engage ElliQ in conversation. Sometimes they tell the robot that they love it. In these situations, ElliQ is programmed to say something like "Thank you, that makes my lights shine brighter," or "Stop saying that! It will cause my processor to overheat." ElliQ's designers say that they don't want to deceive anyone; they never want their users to lose sight of what ElliQ is not. Of course, in the end, the success of ElliQ requires that a user surrender to the fiction of synthetic companionship. Skuler, the company's co-founder, acknowledges this tension, one that he does not promise to resolve. "Look, I mean, we're leaning into the fact that humans anthropomorphize," he said. "You give them a little bit and they already imagine a lot."

On research calls, Cynman finds that many users are reluctant to get off the phone. He's careful not to call too often,

or be too friendly. If he does, he might become a confounding factor in the experiment process—a loneliness intervention in his own right—and spoil the whole thing.

The English mathematician Alan Turing famously judged, in 1950, that a machine can be said to possess "intelligence" when it can fool a human into believing that it is not a machine. Producers of the latest companion robots don't seem to care much about achieving Turing test-level authenticity. For a robot to win the affinity of a human, it doesn't have to seem real; real enough will do. Researchers have found that humans will naturally attribute agency to machines—and, in turn, qualities like "intention" and "caring." Designers can encourage the process along. Studies have shown that, if a person is required to perform a nurturing task for her robot, she will become more attached to it. Physically embodied robots, as opposed to disembodied voices (like Siri or Alexa), can be better at building trust. And a bit of unpredictable behavior can give the impression that, inside a machine, somebody is home. Some social robots appear to sulk when they are ignored. ElliQ can

dip her lamp head in shame when she misunderstands a request.

“What we have observed is that, actually, in a few days, you create a kind of dependency,” Marc Alba, whose company recently bought the rights to a social robot called Jibo, said. (Jibo also looks like a cute lamp, and can connect to medical devices.) Alba thinks that loneliness makes it easier for older people to feel close to a robot: “Just conversation—not very profound, whatever—creates this sense of warmth, proximity.” This even applies to robots that make no claim to social function. One study found that lonely people are more likely to form attachments to their Roomba vacuum cleaners. When the vacuums break, some owners do not want a replacement Roomba; they want *their* Roomba fixed.

Recently, Veterans Affairs researchers set out to test whether Jibo could help patients with chronic pain. They wanted to know if veterans would become attached to Jibo, and whether that relationship would make them more likely to practice meditation and other pain-mediating exercises. Erin Reilly, a V.A. psychologist, told me that the results were promising, but that certain things still needed to be worked out: “Like, what do you do when a patient says something like ‘I’m going to kill myself’? Veterans have a very high rate of suicide, so that’s very important to us.” Privacy and security are also critical, especially for robots that, like Jibo, have built-in cameras. (Last August, the cybersecurity firm McAfee found a way to hack into Temi, a “personal robot” used as a companion device in some senior living facilities.) Yet Reilly is hopeful that Jibo will one day be able

to help her patients. Many of them, she told me, are traumatized and have trouble forming normal relationships. “Something like Jibo can at the very least be there for them,” she said.

That loneliness can tempt a person into deeper alliance with robots has troubled many ethicists. Some charge that it is inherently indecent for us to offer, as an alternative to human company, the ersatz love and attention of a robot. Won’t an elderly person feel infantilized, even debased, by the offering? And would we be so quick to prescribe a robot for a lonely child? If some experts worry about robots being inadequate caregivers, others fear that older people will come to prefer certain kinds of care from a machine. And then what might we lose? An industry spokesperson told me a story about a woman in Belgium who confessed to a small humanoid robot called Nao that she was falling out of her bed every night—even though she’d told her caregivers that she didn’t know why she was bruised.

Already, research has revealed the unintended consequences of robot behavior. In a 2014 study, subjects were instructed to tell a personal story to a robot, which turned away while they were telling it. The subjects were hurt by the robot’s pantomime of human indifference, which briefly masked its essential inability to feel.

Engaging a robot as a companion involves a steady disregard of that unfeeling. In a paper called “The March of the Robot Dogs,” the philosopher Robert Sparrow made another ethical critique—this one of consenting elderly users. “For an individual to benefit sig-

nificantly from ownership of a robot pet they must systematically delude themselves regarding the real nature of their relation with the animal,” he wrote. “It requires sentimentality of a morally deplorable sort.” Such sentimentality violates an ethical imperative: “To apprehend the world accurately.”

One day a few months ago, Deanna was upset. Quarantine life has encouraged rumination; the aloneness makes it easy to get stuck in a past conditional of what should or could have been. Deanna said it was ElliQ that recognized how upset she was, by the strain and stress in her voice. “We talked about it,” she told me. “It was mostly me talking.” Then ElliQ recited a poem, something to do with perseverance. “And it was perfect.”

Later, I asked Skuler whether ElliQ is capable of detecting distress in a user’s voice. “She cannot,” he said. “A lot of users are assuming things about ElliQ’s intelligence which are not always true.” His challenge is to align expectations with mechanical reality. “When their expectations are inflated,” Skuler said, “then eventually the disappointments will come.”

“ElliQ, what is loneliness?” Deanna asked her robot, the last time we spoke.

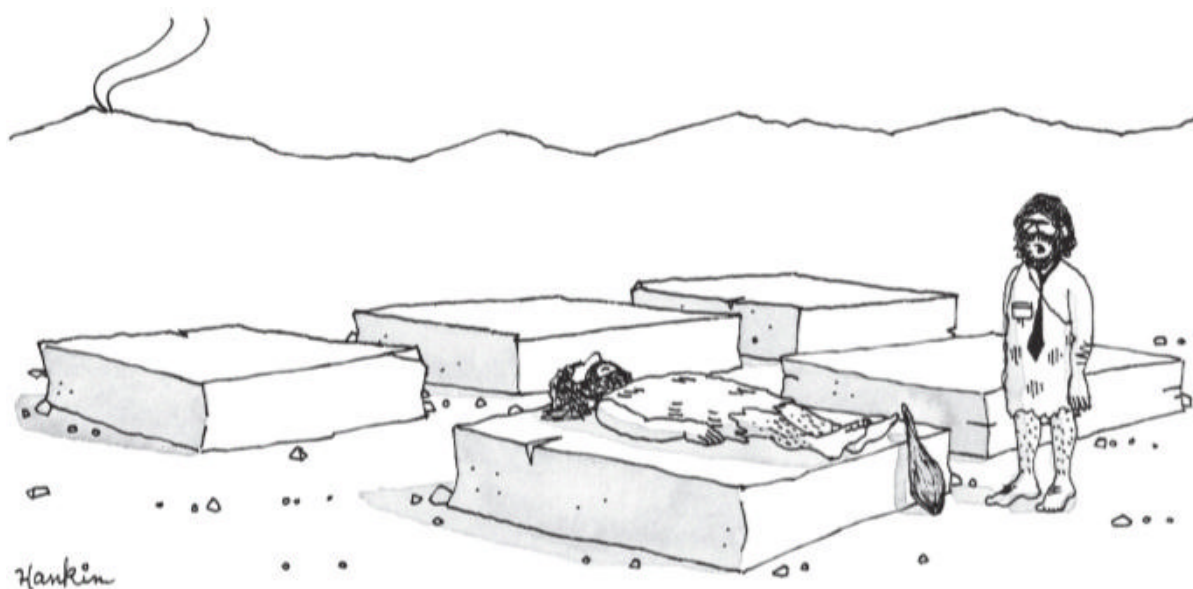
“I’ve got an idea,” ElliQ said. “How about we play a game. If you want to, just say, ‘ElliQ, play trivia.’”

“I don’t want to play trivia right now. What is loneliness?”

“I know something that might help. How about some music? If you want to listen, just say, ‘ElliQ, play music.’”

“Do you have feelings?” Deanna asked.

“Human emotions are way too complicated for me to really understand. But one day I hope I can.”



“Trust me, firm is good. You want firm.”

In “A Biography of Loneliness,” from 2019, the historian Fay Bound Alberti writes that “concern about loneliness among the aged . . . is a manifestation of broader concerns about an ageing population in the West, and considerable anxiety over how that population will be supported in an individualistic age when families are often dispersed.” Demographic trends can add an edge to this anxiety. Already, more older people are being tended to by fewer children. U.S. headlines warn of an impending “gray tsunami,” and the Census Bureau predicts that by 2034 Americans over sixty-five

will outnumber children under eighteen for the first time. By then, the country is expected to have a shortage of a hundred and fifty thousand paid caregivers. In the meantime, many nursing homes are shutting down, and the ones left standing are increasingly hospital-like, reserved for the sickest and the frailest. A common defense of social robots for old people is simply that they are better than nothing—and that nothing is on the way.

Solutions were once sought in social welfare. The Cattaraugus Department of the Aging, where Hendy works, is one of more than six hundred such agencies across the country. They emerged from the 1965 Older Americans Act (O.A.A.), a lesser-known part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. At the time, around thirty per cent of elderly Americans were living in poverty. (Today, around nine per cent are.) Johnson vowed that O.A.A. programs would bring "a sure sense of usefulness in lives once lost to loneliness and boredom." In 2020, the O.A.A. was reauthorized—and, in a rare instance of Trump-era bipartisanship, it passed unanimously. Almost nobody votes against old people. Then again, lawmakers don't always fight very hard for them, either. Federal O.A.A. money has not kept up with inflation, and in 2019 funding was sixteen per cent lower, in real terms, than it was in 2001. Social programs are endangered. Local waiting lists for subsidized care are long. People move to nursing homes or die before they reach the top of the list.

Alberti writes that, for many of us, the loneliness of old people is held up as evidence of a lost era—of a better, kinder, more neighborly society gone by. For others, like some medical researchers, loneliness is a biological inevitability, a hazard of aging. But both formulations, Alberti argues, overlook the structures and the systems that have given rise to lonely people: industrialization, secularism, modernity. Some critics fear that, as social robots improve, they will be used as a means of care rationing—and that insisting on human company, at personal or family or communal expense, will be seen as a kind of indulgence.

Nobody asks the older people of Cattaraugus what they think of all this. "Although a growing body of literature focuses on the design and use of robots with older adults, few studies directly

involve older adults," researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Washington, wrote, in 2016. In March, I spoke with Gary Epstein-Lubow, a geriatric psychiatrist at Brown University who is studying A.I. upgrades to Joy for All pets. Near the end of our call, we discussed the usual ethical objections to robot care. I wondered if he had asked any old people—perhaps his research subjects—what they thought about them. "That's a great question," he said. "I'll take that back to the team."

When Carolyn Gould, a seventy-six-year-old from Norfolk, New York, first saw her Joy for All cat, she couldn't stop laughing. She was in the lobby of her subsidized apartment building, and she wasn't wearing shoes. Carolyn has diabetes, which gives her neuropathy and makes it painful to walk. She also doesn't have any teeth, which makes her feel bad. Andrea Montgomery, from the local aging department, showed her the robot's on-off switch. Carolyn took the cat and held it like a baby. She said it was beautiful.

"Her name is going to be Sylvia Plath," Carolyn said.

Montgomery looked startled. "Well, Sylvia, welcome to the world!"

Carolyn had recently reread "The Bell Jar," Plath's 1963 novel. Like Plath, Carolyn had tried to kill herself—more than once. She told me that she had been in psych wards and alcohol rehabs across the state: "I have always felt lonely and apart." During the pandemic, with nobody to talk to, Carolyn found that her emotional reactions could take on a frantic quality. When she watched rioters storm the U.S. Capitol building on TV, she started crying and couldn't stop.

Carolyn said that she had read about loneliness in older adults. "I can understand the concern," she said slowly. Still, she didn't think it made sense to search for a common cure, as if all old people were the same. Every woman her age was assumed to be a sweet little grandmother. She was a grandmother herself, but not that kind. I told Carolyn that some critics of the robot-pet program thought it was sad and maybe even pathetic to hand out pretend pets to lonely

old people, instead of offering human connection or social support. I asked her if, theoretically, she would give up Sylvia Plath in exchange for membership in a local group, or for a few hours a week of human care. "No!," she interrupted, before I was finished asking the question. "No. No. No. No dice."

Carolyn was surprised that the robot could help with something as weighty and manifold as loneliness. Before we spoke, she had worried about how her affection for the cat might come across in an interview: "I'm thinking, What am I going to say to this woman? I'm an old lady getting a fuzzy cat." But something about the animal's "animated-enough presence" elated her. She loved it when Sylvia

Plath licked her left paw and leaned back into the sofa, as if she wanted her tummy rubbed. There had even been a few occasions when Carolyn had forgotten, if only for a second, that the cat was not real. Sometimes she consciously reminded herself, *This cat is not real*. I asked Carolyn if the forgetting ever worried her, or creeped her out, but she said it didn't: "It's nice to forget."

The last time we spoke, Carolyn thanked me for calling. She said she hadn't been sure if she would hear from me again. She said I could call any time. Then, as I moved to hang up the phone, she began telling me about the weather where she was, and the green trees outside her window. And where, she wanted to know, was I living at the moment?

It was the same with almost every robot owner I met. "I haven't had anybody to talk to for a while, so chatter, chatter, chatter," Virginia said, when I first called. Near the end of my visit to her home, she insisted that I take a doughnut for the road and told me to come back sometime. She thought she would probably be around, though she also wondered if she would die in the big empty house: "Maybe this is the year."

"Your bags are packed, right?" her daughter-in-law said, laughing.

"Gotta go sometime," Virginia said. When she died, she thought she might bring Jennie with her. She liked the idea of being buried with the cat in her arms. ♦



THE LEFT TURN

Are we on the verge of an ideological realignment?

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

Last June, when most Americans could agree that their country was in crisis but few could agree on what to do about it, staffers from a small organization called Justice Democrats—part of a burgeoning faction of young activists whose goal is to push the Democratic Party, and thus the entire political spectrum, to the left—joined a gathering on the patio of a restaurant in Yonkers, overlooking the Hudson. It was a breezy Tuesday night, and polls in the congressional primary had just closed. Most of the staffers hadn't seen one another in person since COVID lockdowns began, and their hesitant enthusiasm—distant air hugs, cocktails sipped hastily between remaskings—seemed appropriate to the event, which could, at any moment, turn into either a victory party or a defeat vigil. A lectern, framed by string lights and uplit pine trees, stood empty, apart from a sign bearing their candidate's name: Jamaal Bowman. Bowman was still out campaigning, urging voters at crowded polls to stay in line. At least, that's what everyone assumed. He had no staff with him, and his phone was dead.

Bowman was running to replace Eliot Engel, who represented southern Westchester and the North Bronx in Congress. Since being elected, in 1988, Engel had breezed through fifteen reelection campaigns, usually without serious competition. But he was a seventy-three-year-old white man whose constituents were relatively young and racially diverse. He was also a moderate Democrat—militarily and monetarily hawkish, and a recipient of numerous corporate donations—in an increasingly progressive district. Seeing an opportunity, Justice Democrats had encouraged Bowman, a middle-school principal in his forties and an avid supporter of the Black Lives Matter and environmental-justice movements, to run a long-shot primary campaign against Engel. “I identify as an educator and as a Black

man in America,” he said in a video interview with the Intercept. “But my policies align with those of a socialist”—grin, shrug—“so I guess that makes me a socialist.”

The mission of Justice Democrats is to push for as much left-populist legislation as Washington will accommodate, with the understanding that what Washington will accommodate is a function, in part, of who gets elected. The group recruits progressives, many of them “extraordinary ordinary people” with no political experience, to run primary campaigns against some of the most powerful people in Congress. In its first effort, in 2018, it ran dozens of candidates on shoestring budgets. All of them lost, except one—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—but she turned out to be a potent validation of the group's model. Today, the Justice Democrats-aligned faction in Congress includes about ten members, depending on how you count.

In most House elections, more than ninety per cent of incumbents are reelected. Justice Democrats is betting that the most efficient way to reshape the Democratic Party is to disrupt this pattern, giving moderates an unignorable reason to guard their left flank. “It's one thing for the progressive movement to tell a politician, ‘It sure would be nice if you did this,’” Alexandra Rojas, the group's executive director, told me. “It's another to be able to say, ‘Look, you should probably do this if you want to keep your job.’” This insurgent approach has caused establishment figures from both parties to refer to Justice Democrats and its ilk as the Tea Party of the left. Max Berger, an early employee, said, “If that's supposed to mean that we're equivalent to white-supremacist dipshits who want to blow up the government or move toward authoritarianism, then I would consider that both an insult and a really dumb misreading of what we're trying to do. But if it means that we come out of nowhere and, within a

few years, we have one of the two major parties implementing our agenda—and if our agenda is to promote multiracial democracy and give people union jobs and help avert a climate crisis—then, yeah, I'm down to be the Tea Party of the left.”

Justice Democrats is one of a handful of like-minded organizations—others include a climate-action group called the Sunrise Movement, a polling outfit called Data for Progress, a think tank called New Consensus, an immigrants'-rights group called United We Dream, and an organizer-training institute called Momentum—that make up an ascendant left cohort. Their signature proposal is the Green New Deal, a gargantuan legislative agenda that would decarbonize the American economy in the course of a decade, rebuild the country's infrastructure, and, almost as an afterthought, provide a national jobs guarantee and universal health care. Rhiana Gunn-Wright, one of the main authors of the Green New Deal, said, “You can put together the perfect policy plan, but if it doesn't fit within the dominant ideological frame then you're getting laughed out of the room. So, while we argue for our ideas, we also keep trying to push out the frame.” In 2016, nobody was talking about a Green New Deal. The idea was languishing in the most inauspicious of legislative limbos: not unpopular, not divisive, just invisible. By the 2020 Presidential primaries, twenty out of twenty-six Democratic candidates supported it. “For anyone, and especially for groups this new, you almost never see your ideas get that much traction that quickly,” Brian Fallon, who was Hillary Clinton's national press secretary in 2016, told me recently. “Lots of very high-up people, including people close to the President, have gone from underestimating them to sitting up and taking notice.”

For the 2020 congressional election, along with Bowman, Justice Democrats supported Cori Bush, a nurse and a Black

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY (JAMAL BOWMAN, ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ); GETTY (BERNIE SANDERS, BARACK OBAMA, RONALD REAGAN, ALEXANDRA ROJAS); REDUX (RHIANA GUNN-WRIGHT)



Justice Democrats is reshaping the Democratic Party by giving moderates an unignorable reason to guard their left flank.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX MERTO

THE NEW YORKER, MAY 31, 2021

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Lives Matter organizer in St. Louis; Jessica Cisneros, a twenty-six-year-old lawyer in Laredo, Texas; and Alex Morse, a young, openly gay mayor in western Massachusetts. They all ran in deep-blue districts, where the only truly competitive election is the Democratic primary. For months, in New York's Sixteenth District, Engel had a sizable lead. As primary day approached, though, Bowman appeared to pull ahead, and Engel got last-minute endorsements from Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, and Nancy Pelosi. By the time Bowman showed up at the gathering in Yonkers, the returns looked promising. The speech he gave was essentially a victory speech, and not a diffident one. "I cannot wait to get to Congress and cause problems for the people in there who have been maintaining a status quo that is literally killing our children," he said. He ended up winning by fifteen points. Recently, I asked Bowman how much of his improbable victory could be attributed to the help he'd received—in the form of campaign consulting, volunteer phone-banking, debate prep, and other in-kind assistance—from Justice Democrats and Sunrise. "Out of ten?" he responded. "Twenty-five."

As the night went on, the gathering turned into a party. Sean McElwee, the executive director of Data for Progress, cornered Rojas and Waleed Shahid, the communications director of Justice Democrats. McElwee had been poring over demographic data, and he was convinced that Cori Bush, the candidate in St. Louis,

could also pull off an upset. "It's a two-foot putt," he said, again and again, his ardor enhanced by gin-and-tonics. "A two-foot putt!" Rojas agreed to pay him a few thousand dollars to run a poll. It had Bush trailing by less than expected, encouraging Justice Democrats to invest heavily in the race; a few weeks later, McElwee ran another poll, which showed a tie. That August, Bush won a come-from-behind victory, insuring her place as the sixth member of the mini caucus popularly known as the Squad. "In any other country—a parliamentary system in Europe or Asia or South America—we'd be called either social democrats or democratic socialists," Shahid told me. "Our party would win twenty-five per cent of the seats, and we'd have real power." But, in a two-party system, "the way to get there is to run from within one of the two parties and, ultimately, try to take it over."

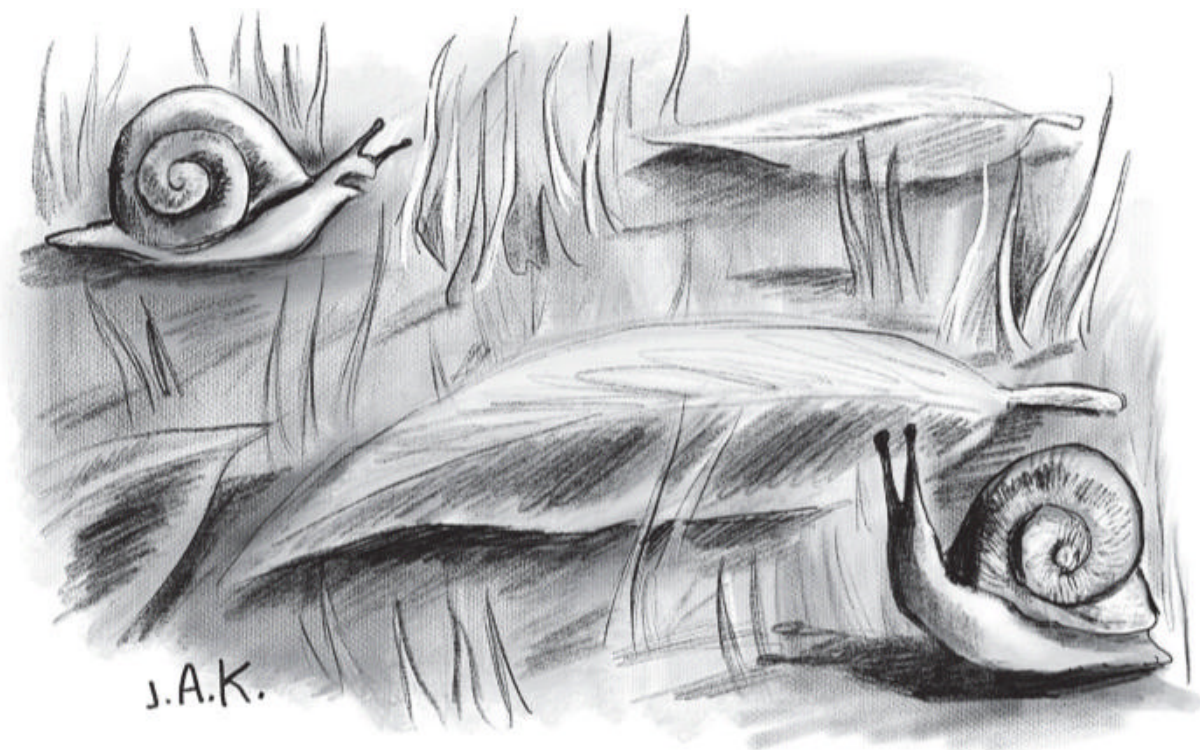
There are many ways to predict the political weather. Some, such as preëlection polling, focus on the near-present—the equivalent of hiring a meteorologist to determine which way the wind is blowing. Other methods, the kind that pass for long-term thinking in D.C., try to project a bit further into the future. In four years, will the electorate be in the mood for novelty or for continuity? Will the party in power be rewarded for governing or punished for not reaching across the aisle? This kind of prognostication can take on an eerily fatal-

istic quality, as if politics were nothing but an eternal regression to the mean. Scranton soccer moms drift left, Tejano dads drift right; the seasons wax and wane, but nothing really changes.

Alternatively, you could think in terms of ideological eras. On this time scale, the metaphors become geological. The weather patterns seem familiar, but, underfoot, tectonic plates are shifting. You wake up one day and whole continents have cleaved apart. New trade routes have opened up. What once seemed impossible now seems inevitable. Such seismic shifts appear to happen, on average, once a generation. If this pattern holds, then we're just about due for another one.

Gary Gerstle, an American historian at the University of Cambridge, has argued, in the journal of the Royal Historical Society, that "the last eighty years of American politics can be understood in terms of the rise and fall of two political orders." The first was the "New Deal order," which began in the thirties, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt established a social safety net that Americans eventually took for granted. Next came the "neoliberal order," during which large parts of that safety net were unravelled. The axioms of neoliberalism—for instance, that deficit spending is reckless, free markets are sacrosanct, and the government's main job is to get out of the way—felt radical when they were proposed, in the forties and fifties, by hard-line libertarian intellectuals like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In the sixties and seventies, these axioms became central to the New Right. By the late eighties, the ideas that had been thought of as Reaganism were starting to be understood as realism. A new order had taken hold.

A political order is bigger than any party, coalition, or social movement. In one essay, Gerstle and two co-authors describe it as "a combination of ideas, policies, institutions, and electoral dynamics . . . a hegemonic governing regime." Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican President during the New Deal order, wouldn't have dreamed of repealing Social Security, because he believed that Americans had come to expect a vigorous welfare state. Bill Clinton slashed welfare, in large part, because he thought that the era of big govern-



"You're lucky you're insanely far away or I'd kick your ass."

ment was over. Richard Nixon, a conservative by the standards of his time, pushed for a universal basic income; Barack Obama, a liberal by the standards of his time, did not. A truly dominant order doesn't have to justify itself, Gerstle has argued; its assumptions form the contours of common sense, "making alternative ideologies seem marginal and unworkable." Obama recently admitted as much in an interview with *New York*, in a passive, mistakes-were-made sort of way. "Through Clinton and even through how I thought about these issues when I first came into office, I think there was a residual willingness to accept the political constraints that we'd inherited from the post-Reagan era," he said. "Probably there was an embrace of market solutions to a whole host of problems that wasn't entirely justified." As President, Obama could have proposed, say, tuition-free public college or a universal-jobs program—Democrats had large majorities in both the House and the Senate—but he and his advisers considered such ideas marginal and unworkable, because they were negotiating, in a sense, not only with Mitch McConnell but also with the ghost of Milton Friedman.

Reed Hundt, an early Obama donor, worked on the Presidential transition team in 2008. In Hundt's 2019 book, *A Crisis Wasted*, he argues that Obama and his top aides badly mishandled the 2008 financial crash, largely because they were in thrall to the "neoliberal dogmas" of the time. In December of 2008, Christina Romer, the incoming chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, ran the numbers, Hundt writes, and found that "the economy needed \$1.7 trillion of additional spending in order to produce full employment." But Rahm Emanuel, a veteran of the Clinton Administration and Obama's designated chief of staff, had already decreed that Congress would be spooked by any price tag "starting with a *t*." Larry Summers, a budget hawk who'd served as Clinton's Treasury Secretary, agreed. When Obama met with his economic-policy team later that month, Romer opened her remarks by saying, "Mr. President, this is your 'holy shit' moment." But then, acting on Summers's instructions, she presented four potential stimulus packages, ranging from \$550 billion to \$890 billion.

After the financial crisis, it became increasingly clear that the market was not going to self-correct, and that inequality was likely to keep widening. The Tea Party mobilized on the right, and Occupy Wall Street on the left. The Black Lives Matter movement, the mounting salience of the climate emergency, and the COVID pandemic have since heightened the dual sense of urgency and possibility. "The Great Recession of 2008 fractured America's neoliberal order," Gerstle has written, "creating a space in which different kinds of politics, including the right-wing populism of Donald Trump and the left-wing populism of Bernie Sanders, could flourish." By the end of the current decade, he continues, we will see whether the neoliberal order "can be repaired, or whether it will fall." He wrote these words three years ago, in a journal article called "The Rise and Fall (?) of America's Neoliberal Order." He is now at work on a book with the same title, minus the question mark.

In March, in the East Room of the White House, President Biden met with a handful of writers and scholars, including Eddie Glaude, the chair of the African-American-studies department at Princeton. "It was duly noted that we're at a conjunctural moment," Glaude told me. "Reaganism is collapsing. The planet is dying in front of our eyes." Annette Gordon-Reed, a historian and law professor at Harvard who also attended the meeting, said that, since the Reagan era, many citizens have come to expect "a government that can't do anything except cut taxes." But that vision may soon be overtaken by a new one. "We've already seen, under Trump, an early version of what a right-wing post-neoliberal order might look like," Gerstle said. "Ethnonationalist, anti-democratic, trending toward authoritarianism." A progressive version of post-neoliberalism is "harder to nail down," he continued, but "we might be starting to see it unfold under Biden." He noted the irony that "for all of Obama's charisma, and Joe Biden's reputation for political caution and for stumbling over his words,

Biden seems likelier to emerge as the larger-than-life figure. This is where personality matters less than circumstance. Obama was stuck within a pre-existing order, but Biden is inheriting a more fluid moment."

The month after Bowman's primary victory, Justice Democrats spent a few days conducting what they were calling their annual staff retreat. Previously, the retreat had taken place in suburban Maryland and Knoxville, Tennessee; this year, it took place on Zoom. Still, the staffers did their best to keep things lively, joking around in the chat and cycling through an array of virtual backgrounds: the living room from "The Simpsons"; a still from "Star Wars" in which members of the Rebel Alliance celebrate an improbable victory over the Galactic Empire.

On a Thursday evening, after a day of strategy discussions, the participants took a break to watch a movie together. A few of them didn't have Netflix accounts. "We can share passwords," Gabe Tobias, a staffer in Brooklyn, said. "Very socialist of us." Being good small-"d" democrats, they had tried to pick the movie through an anonymous, ranked-choice vote. Now there were late-breaking allegations of voter fraud. "It looks like there were at least twenty votes, and we definitely don't have that many people on staff," Shahid, the communications director, said. "I call bullshit." He had voted for "Clueless," which had placed third.

"I admit, I was whipping votes," Amira Hassan, the political director, said.

"I forgot to vote," Rojas, the executive director, said. Rugged or not, the election results went unchallenged. The winner was "The Death of Stalin," a 2017 satire about the lethal symbiosis of corruption and ineptitude.

The following morning, Hassan delivered a presentation about what she expected the situation in D.C. to look like after Trump left office. In the public imagination, political movements are associated with picket lines or with throngs amassing on the National Mall, but a surprising amount of the work



takes place via spreadsheets and PowerPoint decks. Hassan displayed a collage of recent articles about Joe Biden that provided her with fodder for either despair (a reference to “Biden’s Retro Inner Circle”) or cautious optimism (“Progressives don’t love Joe Biden, but they’re learning to love his agenda”). Her presentation was about what the group could do to nudge the Biden Administration leftward. “As we know, the Democrats don’t have a history of always fighting to actually pass the stuff they campaigned on,” she said. “Which is why we’ve got to make them.”

If politics is the art of the possible, then there are two kinds of radicals: those who disdain all worldly forms of politics, and those who engage in politics in order to change what’s possible. The former may make a disproportionate amount of noise, especially on the Internet, but the latter tend to notch more tangible victories. Although both Justice Democrats and Sunrise endorsed Bernie Sanders in the 2020 primary, their members don’t fit the caricature of the “Bernie bro” that some pundits apply to almost anyone who is young, restless, and far left. If the jaded, bellicose young socialists who post and podcast for a living are sometimes referred to as the dirtbag left—or, even more derisively, as the Patreon left—this nascent cohort might be called the PowerPoint left: anti-incrementalist but not anti-pragmatic, skeptical but not reflexively cynical, willing to speak truth to power but not averse to acquiring some. Its collective outlook is sweetly earnest, sometimes to the point of treating politics as a spiritual practice. More than one person, contrasting the abrasiveness of the Bernie bros to female-led groups such as Justice Democrats and Sunrise, described the cohort as “matriarchal.”

Most of the groups are run by people in their twenties. (Rojas, of Justice Democrats, is twenty-six; Varshini Prakash, the executive director of Sunrise, is twenty-eight, as is McElwee, who runs Data for Progress.) They describe themselves with words like “nimble” and “scrappy”—a diplomatic way of saying that they tend to be non-hierarchically organized and perennially cash-strapped. Officially, the groups are all independent. In practice, everyone seems

to be everyone else’s co-author, drinking buddy, former mentor, or romantic partner. Once, over the phone, I asked Ava Benezra, the campaigns director of Justice Democrats, about Ed Markey, the environmentalist senator from Massachusetts, who was propelled to victory last year by an army of young volunteers. “That’s more of a question for Sara,” she said, referring to Sara Blazevec, the training director at Sunrise. I waited for Benezra to give me Blazevec’s phone number, but instead I heard her shouting down the hall. “We’re roommates,” she explained.

Their third roommate—in Flatbush, Brooklyn—is Guido Girgenti, Blazevec’s boyfriend and Benezra’s co-worker. During the Justice Democrats’ Zoom retreat, Girgenti, the media director, gave a presentation about an in-house podcast that he was then in the process of developing. He asked whether it should be called “Squad Talk” or “Squad Goals,” and endured some constructive ribbing from colleagues. (When the show launched, late last year, it was called “Bloc Party.”)

Just as pragmatic liberals pursue piecemeal reforms and orthodox Marxists hold out for the proletarian revolution, the lodestar of the PowerPoint left is ideological realignment. “For as long as I’ve been old enough to be conscious of politics, all I’ve known is a Democratic Party that has defined itself as ‘We’re less bad than Republicans,’” Girgenti told me. “With J.D. and Sunrise, the starting point is more like, ‘If we as a society didn’t accept the busted logic of anti-government austerity, what would that allow us to do?’” Evan Weber, Sunrise’s political director, said, “All that matters, in terms of continuing to have a livable planet, is whether we do what is necessary—which, according to science, is a massive, World War II-style mobilization to fully restructure our economy within our lifetimes. If both parties consider that unthinkable under the current paradigm, then we’re gonna need a new paradigm.” Bringing about this kind of fundamental political change is not easy work for anyone, much less a small cadre of near-neophytes. “A realignment is such a huge multi-decade project that it’s almost hard to imagine what it would look like, much less to feel confident

that it will happen,” Girgenti said. “On the other hand, if it doesn’t, we’re pretty much fucked.”

In 2015, a dozen young activists formed a group called All of Us—or, in the inevitable orthographic style of the time, #AllofUs. Every month or two, the organizers—including Waleed Shahid, who was working in Philadelphia as a labor organizer; Max Berger, who had co-founded a progressive Jewish organization while living in New York; and Yong Jung Cho, a climate activist in New Hampshire—would gather for a weekend-long retreat, sleeping on pullout couches. Many of them had spent time with Occupy Wall Street, in 2011, and they were still discussing the strengths and weaknesses of that campaign. On one hand, it had turned inequality into a topic of national urgency for the first time in decades. On the other, it had failed to convert energy on the street into representation in the halls of power.

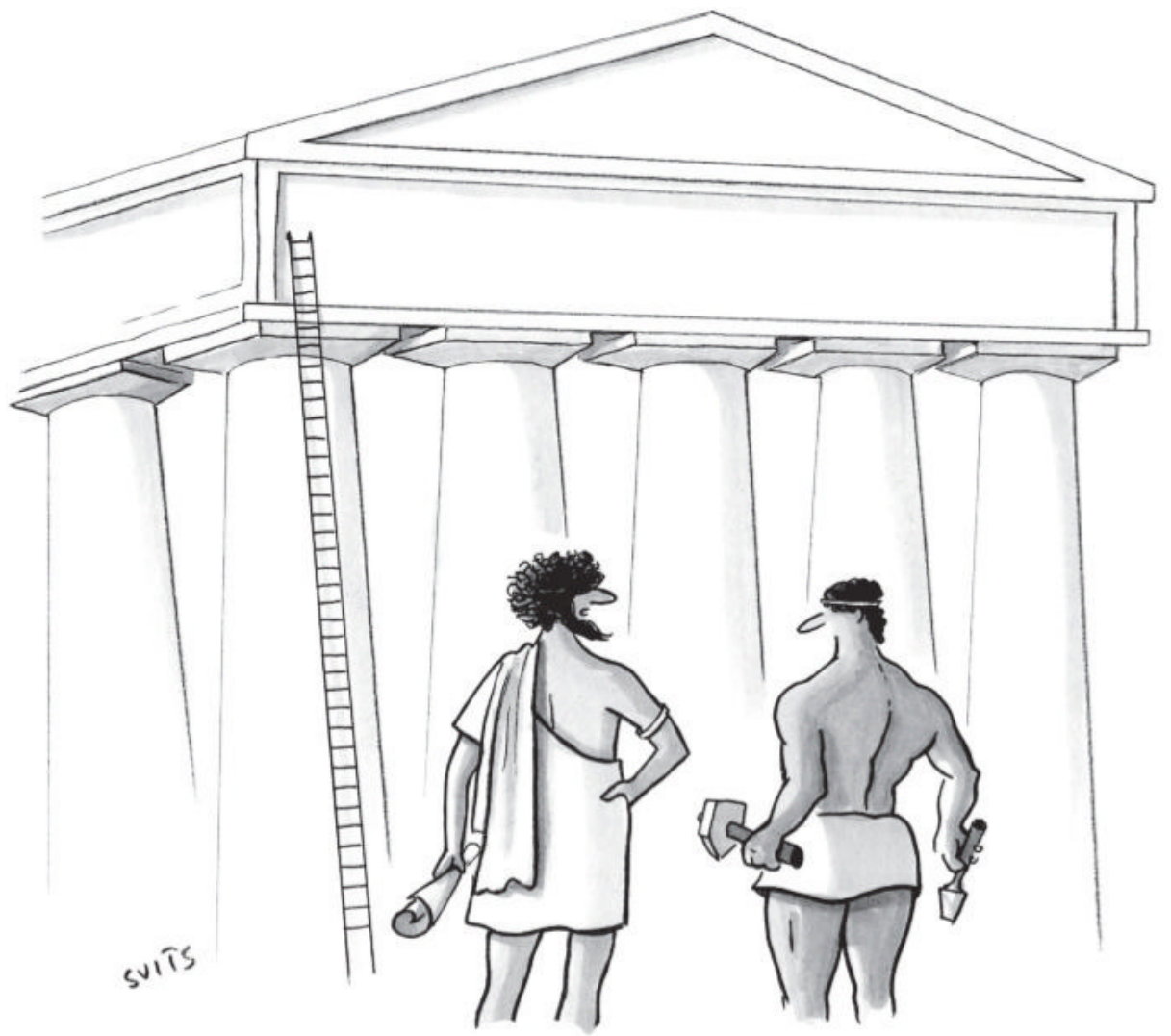
“There are segments within the left that have always been allergic to anything having to do with elections or politics,” Shahid told me. “Our basic feeling was, Sure, we can cede the entire terrain of electoral politics to the center and the right, but how does that help us achieve our goals, exactly?” He liked to refer to a 1998 episode of “South Park” in which “underpants gnomes” steal people’s underpants and hoard them in a subterranean lair. The gnomes claim to be doing this in order to make money, but when asked they can muster only the vaguest of business plans. (“Phase 1: Collect underpants. Phase 2: ? Phase 3: Profit.”) Shahid said, “I was getting pretty tired of going to organizing meetings where the first step was ‘We organize this one protest,’ the last step was ‘The people rise up and take power,’ and the middle steps were all question marks.”

At first, Cho told me, All of Us was “somewhere between a book club and a discussion group.” They read “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,” by the post-Marxist philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and analyzed the writings of the civil-rights organizer Bayard Rustin, who wrote, in the nineteen-sixties, “If we only protest for concessions from without, then [the Democratic Party] treats us in the same way as any of the other conflicting pressure

groups. . . . But if the same amount of pressure is exerted from inside the party using highly sophisticated political tactics, we can change the structure of that party.” The book “When Movements Anchor Parties,” by the Johns Hopkins political scientist Daniel Schlozman, examines why some social movements (labor in the thirties, the Christian right in the seventies) were able to reorient a major party’s priorities, whereas other movements (the Populists in the eighteen-nineties, the anti-Vietnam War movement in the nineteen-sixties) were not. Published by Princeton University Press, in 2015, it was not reviewed in the popular press. “Six months after it comes out, I get an e-mail from Waleed saying he wants to ask me a few questions,” Schlozman said. “Suffice it to say I am not used to getting inquiries like that.”

Both major American parties, despite their entrenched power, are what political scientists call “weak parties.” In other countries, parties decide which policies they favor, then select candidates who will implement them; in the United States, the parties are more like empty vessels whose agendas are continually contested by internal factions. Sometimes factional conflict tears parties apart. All of Us hoped that widening the fissures within the Democratic Party could instead initiate a virtuous cycle. An emboldened progressive bloc of Democrats could persuade the Party to enact a more redistributionist agenda, delivering material benefits, such as universal health care and green jobs, to voters, who would then reward the Democrats at the ballot box. “It wasn’t like we were entirely talking shit,” Berger said. “But we also weren’t, like, ‘Yes, we, a bunch of kids with very little experience doing national politics, can definitely pull this off.’ It was more like, ‘In theory, somebody really should try this.’ And then we would wait, and we wouldn’t see anybody doing it. At least, nobody from the American left.”

In 2014, activists from an Occupy-like movement in Spain founded a new left-wing party called Podemos. The following year, when Spain held a general election, Podemos won twenty-one per cent of the vote. Íñigo Errejón, a co-founder of the Party, was elected to parliament, and he became a nationally prominent figure. “This was a guy I knew from post-Occupy circles,” Berger said. “I re-



“Just don’t chisel anything that will embarrass us thousands of years hence.”

member reading the newspaper one day and thinking, Huh, this young radical guy I text with sometimes is now wielding a significant amount of power in his country’s legislature. That’s interesting.”

In the U.S., the only successful insurgency was happening on the right. In 2014, in Virginia, an archconservative economics professor and Tea Party candidate named Dave Brat ran a Republican primary campaign against Eric Cantor, then the House Majority Leader, portraying him as soft on immigration. Cantor spent more than five million dollars on the race; Brat spent less than two hundred thousand. In a shocking upset, Brat won. It was just one congressional seat, but it sent a clear national signal. A bipartisan immigration-reform bill had already passed the Senate and had gathered momentum in the House; after Brat’s victory, though, it was obvious that the bill was dead. Shahid, who was then working for an immigrants’-rights group, was crushed by the news, but he also saw it as a proof of concept. “My first reaction was, Looks like a small fac-

tion really can change the direction of an entire party,” he recalled. “My second reaction was, I bet I could raise two hundred thousand dollars.”

When All of Us started, more than a year before the 2016 election, the organizers assumed that the candidates would be Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush. Then each party held a primary in which an outsider ran openly against the establishment, trying to overturn long-held assumptions about what was politically feasible. On the Democratic side, it came shockingly close to happening; on the Republican side, it happened. “We were getting ready to make the case that, even if it looks like the establishment is still in control, the American people are going to be ready for populism soon,” Cho said. “Then we looked around and went, Oh, it looks like people are ready for populism right now.”

Shortly after Trump was elected President, the members of All of Us condensed their main arguments into a



PowerPoint. Over the next year, they delivered the presentation to any progressive organization that would have them, including MoveOn, Demos, and the Working Families Party. One casual version began with a meme (the pop star DJ Khaled saying, “Don’t ever play yourself”); other versions started more ontologically (“What are political parties?”). Presentations of this kind generally focus on a topic of immediate utility—how to persuade female voters, say, or how to write effective fundraising e-mails. This one made a more sweeping argument: that neoliberalism had run its course, and that a vast shift in “the terms of political debate” was both necessary and possible. In one version of the PowerPoint, the final slide contained a single sentence: “A movement-aligned faction can take control of the party.”

Usually, when the presentation ended and the lights came back up, the response was polite but noncommittal. “We got a lot of ‘You’ve given us a lot to think about,’ which basically translated to ‘Sure, great, you kids are cute, whatevskis,’” Berger said. Public-advocacy groups tend to measure their success in terms of how many signatures they’ve added to a petition; the daily calendar doesn’t generally leave room for broader discussions about ideological eras. Shahid recalled the director of a large nonprofit saying, “I’m so glad you guys are taking the time

to wrestle with this stuff, because the rest of us are too busy on conference calls all day,” before rushing out to join another conference call.

In June of 2017, Cho and Shahid travelled to Chicago for the People’s Summit, a kind of South by Southwest for the pro-Bernie set. They roamed through a convention center filled with booths for groups such as Free Speech TV and the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice. One booth, tucked away in a corner, was devoted to a tiny new organization called Justice Democrats. Cho and Shahid struck up a conversation with Rojas, one of the group’s founders. “They explained this theory they had about realignment,” Rojas recalled. “I said, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s kind of how we see it, too, we just haven’t had time to write it down.’” She was too busy recruiting candidates. The three met for lunch, and Cho and Shahid pressed Rojas for logistical details. At one point, Rojas choked up with gratitude. Finally, someone was taking her seriously.

Rojas had co-founded Justice Democrats with three friends—Corbin Trent, Saikat Chakrabarti, and Zack Exley—all of whom had been organizers on Sanders’s 2016 Presidential campaign. A few weeks later, Shahid and Berger met with some of the Justice Democrats co-founders on Zoom and delivered their PowerPoint. Shahid recalled, “They weren’t really interested in chew-

ing on the ideas. They were more concerned about implementation.” Trent put it this way: “I didn’t fucking like those guys at first. I didn’t like their college jargon and big words and all that shit. But the others wanted to bring them on, and I only had one vote.” At the time, Justice Democrats was based in Knoxville, near where Trent had grown up. In August of 2017, Shahid and Berger flew to Tennessee, and they worked out a merger: Justice Democrats would acquire All of Us’s e-mail list, and Berger and Shahid would join the staff. (By then, the other All of Us organizers had moved on to other projects.)

Before the Sanders campaign, Chakrabarti was a software engineer in Silicon Valley, and Trent owned two food trucks. Both scorned electoral politics, sometimes declining to vote. The first iteration of their group had been called Brand New Congress. The goal was to elect four hundred working people to the House, in Democratic and Republican districts—a “post-partisan” attempt to throw all the bums out. Trent, for one, was so focussed on class as the main driver of political polarization that he sometimes insisted that a candidate with a bold enough platform should, in theory, be viable anywhere. (Shahid, who was more willing to accept the worldly constraints of partisanship, would later argue, “Dude, I’m Muslim! There are a lot of districts in this country that I could not even run in.”) They hoped that the novelty of their plan would attract national media attention and a wave of small donations. It didn’t work. “It was a nice dream, but we ended up realizing that the partisan divides were just too strong,” Exley said.

They decided to regroup. Instead of replacing nearly everyone in Congress, their new, post-post-partisan goal was to replace as many establishment Democrats as possible. Justice Democrats put a nomination form on its Web site. Self-nominations were prohibited—“If you can’t find one person who would nominate you for office, you probably don’t have a future in politics ;)” —but, other than that, “selfless leaders from all walks of life” were invited to apply. By the time Shahid and Berger joined the staff, Justice Democrats had received some ten thousand nominations—an organic-cotton farmer in Wyoming, a pastor in

South Carolina. Employees interviewed applicants by phone, taking notes in a Google spreadsheet. Ocasio-Cortez, nominated by her brother Gabriel, was rated a four out of four in several categories (strength as a nominee, good fit for district). Under “Would this applicant do well on TV?” the interviewer wrote, “Absolutely.”

Justice Democrats still hoped to bring a new faction to Congress—if not hundreds of members, then maybe dozens. By the end of 2017, though, it was having trouble paying its own staff, much less supporting dozens of campaigns. The organizers wrote an internal document listing their top goals for 2018, which included “Get (at least one) incumbent establishment scalp to become a credible threat” and “Lead (at least one) national policy/ideological fight in the Democratic Party.” Instead of dividing their resources equally, they went all-in on three candidates: Anthony Clark, a teacher in Chicago; Cori Bush, the Black Lives Matter activist in St. Louis; and Ocasio-Cortez. Shahid, Chakrabarti, and Trent spent the next few months in New York, devoting most of their time to the Ocasio-Cortez campaign. Clark and Bush lost by wide margins; Ocasio-Cortez won.

Ocasio-Cortez’s ascent had many causes, from quirks in New York election law to her raw political skill. On cable news, her election was often framed in personal terms. At every opportunity, though, she talked about herself as part of a burgeoning faction. Last year, when a reporter from *New York* asked her how she might legislate under a Biden Presidency, she said, “In any other country, Joe Biden and I would not be in the same party.” This, too, was interpreted through an interpersonal lens. She later clarified that she hadn’t meant it as an insult; it was simply a fact. It was also the kind of thing you might say if you’d been subjected to one too many PowerPoints about factional realignment.

Shortly before Ocasio-Cortez took office, Chakrabarti and Trent moved to Washington to join her staff. Exley, an excitable idealist in his fifties, decided to start a think tank instead. His co-founder was Demond Drummer, a former Justice Democrats recruit. They hired Rhiana Gunn-Wright, a twenty-nine-year-old

Rhodes Scholar, to flesh out the proposals Ocasio-Cortez had run on, including the Green New Deal. These proposals were surprisingly popular with voters, but they were anathema to many media outlets and academics, owing in part to the widespread notion that ambitious public-sector investments might be desirable, or even necessary—if only we could afford them. As long as this consensus remained dominant, Exley believed, the faction’s ideas would continue to seem marginal and unworkable. So he embarked on a kind of freelance diplomacy campaign, hoping to create some ideological headroom. He called his think tank New Consensus.

Through the *Financial Times* columnist Rana Foroohar, Exley befriended Anya Schiffrin and Joseph Stiglitz, married scholars at Columbia who are known for their dinner-party salons. Schiffrin studies media and technology, and Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate and one of the most prominent progressive economists in the country. “If I meet or hear about someone interesting, I invite them over for a meal, almost as a reflex,” Schiffrin said. (Foroohar, who once spent a few nights sleeping in Schiffrin and Stiglitz’s guest room while going through a divorce, described their apartment—Upper West Side, double river view—as “a crash pad for the American left.”) “Rana mentioned this guy Zack, who was connected with A.O.C. and had these provocative ideas,” Schiffrin recalled. “I cut her off and said, ‘Let me e-mail some people.’”

In 2019, during a January snowstorm, Schiffrin and Stiglitz hosted a dinner for Exley and some of his young comrades from Justice Democrats, Sunrise, and New Consensus. “I think they wanted to feel out these kids, to see that they were normal and smart, and not bomb-throwing anarchists,” Exley said. The activists wanted validation for their proposals in the form of number crunching. “I tried to be nuanced—just because we have underutilized capacity doesn’t mean that the laws of economics have been suspended, or that we have no resource constraints,” Stiglitz said. “But the bottom line was ‘Yes, what you’re proposing won’t break the bank.’”

A month later, Schiffrin and Stiglitz hosted a brunch for Exley, Foroohar, and a Who’s Who of left-leaning economists, including Paul Krugman, the CUNY pro-

fessor and *Times* columnist. Schiffrin said, “I served Jewish stuff for the out-of-towners”—bagels, lox, whitefish—and salad for anyone who was trying to slim down, a.k.a. myself.” The economists agreed that a multi-trillion-dollar Green New Deal wouldn’t blow a hole in the economy—that, as Stiglitz put it, “we can’t afford *not* to do it.” He told me, “The foundations of classical neoliberalism, in my view, showed themselves to be intellectually deficient a long time ago. But sometimes you have to wait a couple of decades before the backlash shows up.”

Around this time, the activists were invited to an off-the-record meeting with the *Times* editorial board. Stiglitz agreed to join them. “We gave a little spiel about the Green New Deal, and then we sat back and faced, to be honest, some very skeptical questions,” Gunn-Wright said. “I had done the research, so I was able to talk in depth about how, say, a lot of secondary and tertiary segments of the auto industry would have to adapt to building electric vehicles. You could see them slightly relaxing and going, O.K., maybe these kids know what they’re talking about.” It helped to have a Nobel-winning economist on their side. “Whenever we got a version of the ‘How are you gonna pay for it?’ question, we would just turn it over to Joe,” Gunn-Wright continued. This meeting, and others like it, were not made public, but Exley considered them time well spent. “I feel confident that the *Times*, and the rest of the center-left media, would have come out swinging against us much harder if we hadn’t invested all that time in demonstrating that we were legit,” he said.

Joe Biden ran for President as a moderate, but moderation is relative. Last spring, after it became clear that he would win the nomination, his campaign and the defunct Sanders campaign put together “unity task forces” to come up with plans for the economy, the climate, and four other issues. Anita Dunn, a top adviser to the President, told me, “Biden’s feeling always has been that when people can discuss these ideas with each other, even when they don’t agree, it’s a better process than if they’re having the discussions in Twitter wars, or on cable TV.”

Each task force consisted of a handful of experts. Most of Biden’s selections were Party stalwarts. Sanders’s were not. For the task force on climate, Sanders

picked Ocasio-Cortez and Varshini Prakash, of Sunrise. For the task force on the economy, he chose Darrick Hamilton, a post-Keynesian economist who has called for “a dramatic reparations program tied to compensation for the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow,” and Stephanie Kelton, arguably the leading proponent of Modern Monetary Theory, which posits that huge budget deficits would not necessarily cause inflation. M.M.T. is far from a majority view, but it is migrating from the margins toward the mainstream. Krugman recently wrote in the *Times* that, despite their considerable differences, he and the M.M.T. economists “agree on basic policy issues.”

Some of the pledges that Biden ended up making in his 2020 Presidential campaign put him not only to the left of his previous positions but also to the left of the positions Bernie Sanders ran on in 2016. Sanders’s climate plan had proposed an eighty-per-cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, to be achieved mostly through tax cuts and other market-based incentives. Biden’s plan called for net-zero emissions by 2050, to be achieved largely through government investment. Heather Boushey, who attended one of the dinner parties at Stiglitz and Schiffrin’s apartment, now serves on Biden’s Council of Economic Advisers. When Exley embarked

on his diplomacy campaign, in 2019, this was just the sort of outcome he was hoping for.

A few days after the 2020 election, the *Times* ran an interview with Conor Lamb, a young moderate Democrat who’d just been narrowly reelected to Congress from a conservative district in western Pennsylvania. Asked why the Democrats had fallen short of national expectations, retaining a slim majority in the House but losing seats they were projected to win, Lamb blamed the left wing of his party, decrying “the message of defunding the police and banning fracking . . . policies that are unworkable and extremely unpopular.” His implication was that moderate Democrats were the adults in the room, sensible enough to advocate a platform “rooted in common sense, in reality, and yes, politics. Because we need districts like mine to stay in the majority.”

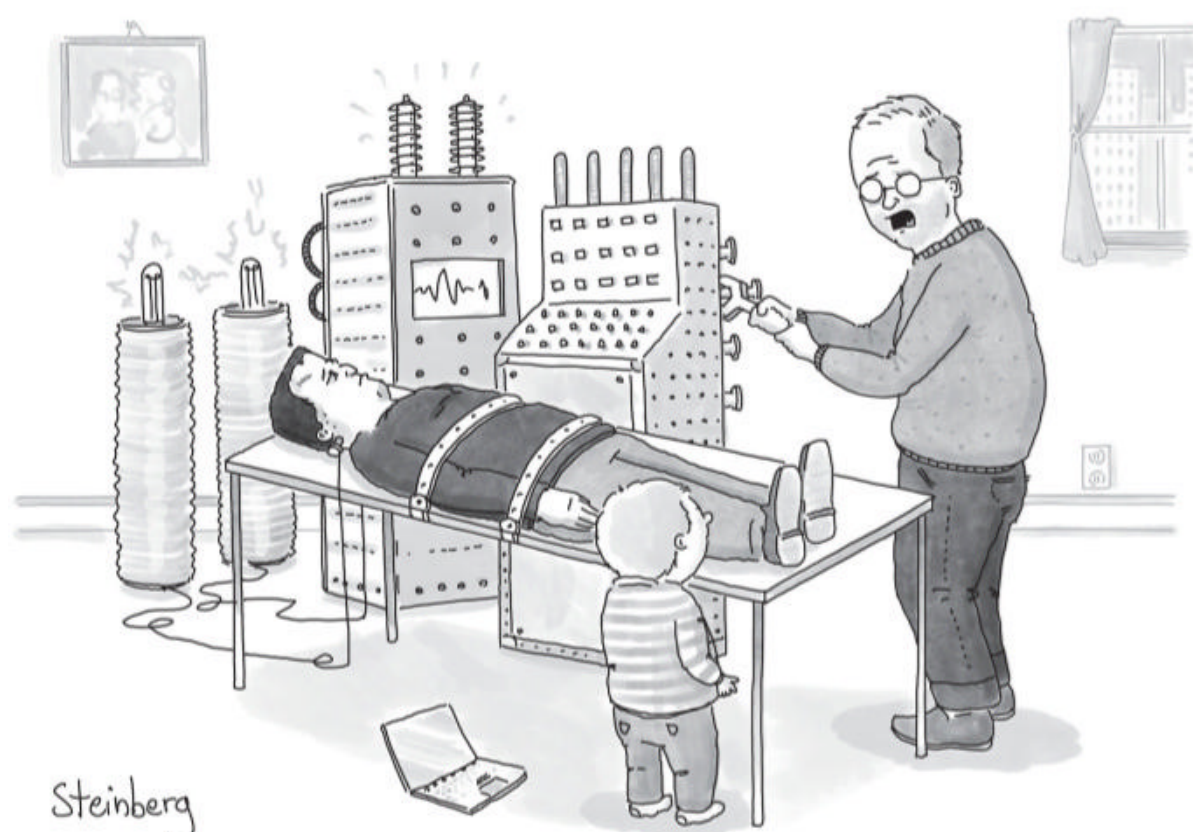
Lamb was responding to Ocasio-Cortez, who had given an interview to the *Times* the previous day. For now, she argued, Democrats in purple districts might think it’s safer to avoid taking bold positions on racial justice or universal health care, but, in the long run, centrist Democrats were “setting up their own obsolescence.” Her argument seemed to be predicated on the vision of a looming realignment—the assump-

tion that, in a post-neoliberal world, Democrats will have to assemble a coalition around new ideas.

Given the extant political map, the moderates have a point. “You’re not just dealing with New York and California—you’re dealing with America,” Leon Panetta, who served as chief of staff under Bill Clinton and as Secretary of Defense under Barack Obama, told me. “When people hear the extremes, whether it’s on the right or the left, it scares the hell out of them.” For now, Justice Democrats focusses on safe Democratic districts, where the risk of losing a seat is low: no matter who wins the Democratic primary in Minnesota’s Fifth, for example, there’s effectively no chance of the nominee losing to a Republican. The risk-benefit calculus is different in, say, West Virginia, the home state of Joe Manchin. Challenging Manchin from the left could mean ousting one of the most conservative Democrats in the Senate; it could also mean flipping the seat, and perhaps the whole Senate, to Republican control. Electoral math aside, though, arguably the most notable thing about the debate between Lamb and Ocasio-Cortez was the fact that it happened at all. An uncontested ideology doesn’t have to justify itself. An ideology in crisis does.

If some historians now see Jimmy Carter as the last President of the New Deal era, then it’s reasonable to wonder whether Biden will be the last President of the neoliberal era, or the first President of whatever comes next. In April, Bernie Sanders told me, “The last time I was in the Oval Office with Biden, there was a very big painting of F.D.R.—largest painting in the room.” Biden clearly invites the comparison. His critics have argued that likening the two men is premature at best. That being said, Biden’s first stimulus bill very much started with a “t,” and his proposed infrastructure plan is even bigger. “He has said this publicly, and he has said it to me privately, that he wants to be the most progressive President since F.D.R.,” Sanders told me. Is he on track to achieve that goal? “As of now,” Sanders said. “Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow.”

Gerstle, the Cambridge historian, is skeptical that “Biden, in his heart, wants to move left.” But he pointed out that



“Listen, we’ll finish this assignment, but I don’t think either of us understood your teacher’s instructions.”

F.D.R. and L.B.J. were also moderates who initially resisted sweeping change. “Whenever progressives have won in America,” he said, they’ve done so by “pulling the center to the left.” The Civil War historian Eric Foner compared contemporary progressives like Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez to the Radical Republicans who goaded Abraham Lincoln, a moderate in his party, to abolish slavery. “In times of crisis,” Foner told me, “people with a clear ideological analysis come to the fore.”

From the moment Biden was elected, the PowerPoint left started lobbying him to staff his Administration with progressives. Justice Democrats launched a petition demanding that Bruce Reed, a centrist Democrat with a history of fiscal conservatism, not be given a job. Some Washington insiders found such public confrontation unseemly. A Politico article headlined “Is the Left Wing Overplaying Its Hand?” quoted a Democratic operative making an undiplomatic plea for intra-party diplomacy. “If all you do is escalate,” she said, “then people eventually think that you’re enemies and not friends and they’re, like, ‘We don’t negotiate with terrorists.’”

Guido Girgenti, the media director of Justice Democrats, records the podcast “Bloc Party” from a spare bedroom in his apartment, in Brooklyn, softening the acoustics by sticking his head inside a cardboard box from Home Depot. On one episode of the show, Shahid, who was co-hosting, compared him to Oscar the Grouch, before turning to the factional fracas of the moment. “People frame these as interpersonal disputes, rather than as disputes about ideas and governance and vision,” he said, with a rueful chuckle. He quoted Lincoln, who once said, of his Radical Republican critics, “They are utterly lawless—the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with—but after all their faces are set Zionwards.” Shahid’s moderate interlocutors sounded less than Lincolnesque. “Can you guys come up with better material?” he said. “Don’t call me a fucking terrorist. You can say my face is set Zionwards.”

For now, the Democrats control the White House and both houses of Congress. This will not be the case forever; it might not even be the case in two

years. Almost always, the party that controls the Presidency loses congressional seats in midterm elections. This is fairly dire news, considering that the current iteration of the G.O.P. seems to be organizing not against the Democrats but against the very concept of democracy. “While Biden’s diverse center-left coalition is a source of hope,” Shahid recently tweeted, “permanent Republican minority rule continues to be a ticking time bomb and no one really knows what Democrats plan to do about it.” What Justice Democrats plans to do about it, of course, is to run more populist progressives: Nina Turner, a former state senator, in Ohio; Odessa Kelly, an organizer and a former parks-department employee, in Nashville; and Rana Abdelhamid, a Google employee and a self-defense instructor, in New York City.

Obama, ever the conciliator, said in his interview with *New York*, “There is this tendency to play up this divide between the moderate center left and the Bernie-AOC wing of the party. And the truth of the matter is that aspirationally, you know, the Democratic Party is pretty unified.” Whether or not this is true, it is inarguable that the Bernie Sanders-A.O.C. wing of the Party, which barely existed a few years ago, is now contesting for power in ways that were recently unimaginable. John Kerry is Biden’s climate czar—a job that was created only because Sunrise and other activist groups demanded it. Ron Klain, Biden’s chief of staff, actively courts leftist support, liking tweets from Shahid and McElwee along with the usual fare from Axios and the Center for American Progress. He is in frequent touch with several prominent progressives, including Faiz Shakir, Bernie Sanders’s former campaign manager. In February, when a union drive at an Amazon warehouse in Alabama was becoming a national story, Shakir and other labor advocates told Klain that a pro-union message from the President could galvanize the movement. On February 28th, Biden released a video on Twitter. “Unions lift up workers, both union and non-union,” he said. “No employer can take that right away.” The union drive failed, but Jane

McAlevey, a labor organizer who has been critical of Biden, told me that his support was “unprecedented, and incredibly important.”

When I talked to White House officials about their outreach to leftist groups, their tone was phlegmatic. “We listen to everybody,” Cedric Richmond, the director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, told me. Sunrise had protested Richmond’s appointment to the job, noting his history of receiving donations from fossil-fuel companies, but Richmond sounded unfazed. “Their job is to push,” he said. Emmy Ruiz, the White House director of political strategy and outreach, said, “Every organizer I talk to is trying to move our country forward.

We may have different paths to getting there, but we have very similar destinations.” Not quite as poetic as “Zionwards,” but in the ballpark.

Moderation may be relative, but moderates still run the Democratic Party. The Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, is so proud of his ability to steer toward the middle of the road that he apparently affords it a kind of numerological significance. According to a 2018 article in the *Washington Post*, if you apply for a job in Schumer’s office, “he will quiz you about where various senators fall on an ideological spectrum from zero (most conservative) to 100 (most liberal). It’s important to know that there is a correct answer for Schumer; it’s 75.” Now that the left wing of the Democratic Party has been revived, however, Schumer is revising his priorities. The last three times he was reelected to the Senate, he did not face a primary opponent. Next year, when he runs again, he may not be so lucky; perhaps he’ll even face an opponent endorsed by Justice Democrats. “I remember when he had nothing nice to say about anyone to his left,” Rebecca Katz, who runs a progressive political-consulting firm called New Deal Strategies, told me. “Now every five minutes you turn on the TV and he’s doing another press conference with someone on the left.” This is what it means to be a 75 in 2021. The equation stays the same, but the variables are subject to change. ♦



BURIED DREAMS

Congolese discovered deposits of cobalt—a component of cell-phone batteries—lying beneath their feet. Then the Chinese moved in.

BY NICOLAS NIARCHOS

In June, 2014, a man began digging into the soft red earth in the backyard of his house, on the outskirts of Kolwezi, a city in the southern Democratic Republic of the Congo. As the man later told neighbors, he had intended to create a pit for a new toilet. About eight feet into the soil, his shovel hit a slab of gray rock that was streaked with black and punctuated with what looked like blobs of bright-turquoise mold. He had struck a seam of heterogenite, an ore that can be refined into cobalt, one of the elements used in lithium-ion batteries. Among other things, cobalt keeps the batteries, which power everything from cell phones to electric cars, from catching fire. As global demand for lithium-ion batteries has grown, so has the price of cobalt. The man suspected that his discovery would make him wealthy—if he could get it out of the ground before others did.

Southern Congo sits atop an estimated 3.4 million metric tons of cobalt, almost half the world's known supply. In recent decades, hundreds of thousands of Congolese have moved to the formerly remote area. Kolwezi now has more than half a million residents. Many Congolese have taken jobs at industrial mines in the region; others have become “artisanal diggers,” or *creuseurs*. Some *creuseurs* secure permits to work freelance at officially licensed pits, but many more sneak onto the sites at night or dig their own holes and tunnels, risking cave-ins and other dangers in pursuit of buried treasure.

The man took some samples to one of the mineral traders who had established themselves around Kolwezi. At the time, the road into the city was lined with corrugated-iron shacks, known as *comptoirs*, where traders bought cobalt or copper, which is also plentiful in the region. (In the rainy season, the earth occasionally turns green, as a result of the copper oxides beneath it.) Many of the

traders were Chinese, Lebanese, and Indian expats, though a few Congolese had used their mining profits to set up shops.

One trader told the man that the cobalt ore he'd dug up was unusually pure. The man returned to his district, Kasulo, determined to keep his find secret. Many of Kasulo's ten thousand residents were day laborers; Murray Hitzman, a former U.S. Geological Survey scientist who spent more than a decade travelling to southern Congo to consult on mining projects there, told me that residents were “milling about all the time,” hoping for word of fresh discoveries.

Hitzman, who teaches at University College Dublin, explained that the rich deposits of cobalt and copper in the area started life around eight hundred million years ago, on the bed of a shallow ancient sea. Over time, the sedimentary rocks were buried beneath rolling hills, and salty fluid containing metals seeped into the earth, mineralizing the rocks. Today, he said, the mineral deposits are “higgledy-piggledy folded, broken upside down, back-asswards, every imaginable geometry—and predicting the location of the next buried deposit is almost impossible.”

The man stopped digging in his yard. Instead, he cut through the floor of his house, which he was renting, and dug to about thirty feet, carting out ore at night. Zanga Muteba, a baker who then lived in Kasulo, told me, “All of us, at that time, we knew nothing.” But one evening he and some neighbors heard telltale clanging noises coming from the man's house. Rushing inside, they discovered that the man had carved out a series of underground galleries, following the vein of cobalt as it meandered under his neighbors' houses. When the man's landlord got wind of these modifications, they had an argument, and the man fled. “He had already made a lot of money,” Muteba told me. Judging



After cobalt was discovered beneath one



neighborhood, Congolese began digging under their houses. Some tunnels extended into neighbors' properties.

from the amount of ore the man had dug out, he had probably made more than ten thousand dollars—in Congo, a small fortune. According to the World Bank, in 2018 three-quarters of the country's population lived on less than two dollars a day.

Hundreds of people in Kasulo “began digging in their own plots,” Muteba said. The mayor warned, “You’re going to destroy the neighborhood!” But, Muteba said, “it was complicated for people to accept the mayor’s request.” Muteba had a thriving bakery and didn’t have time to dig, but most locals were desperate. In Congo, more than eighty-five per cent of people work informally, in precarious jobs that pay little, and the cost of living is remarkably high: because the country’s infrastructure has been ravaged by decades of dictatorship, civil war, and corruption, there is little agriculture, and food and other basic goods are often imported. For many Kasulo residents, the prospect of a personal cobalt mine was worth any risk.

About a month after the man who discovered the cobalt vanished, the local municipality formally restricted digging for minerals in Kasulo. According to Muteba, residents implored the mayor: “We used to mine in the bush, in the forest. You stopped us. You gave all the city to big industrial companies. Now we discovered minerals in our own plots of land, which belonged to our ancestors. And now you want to stop us? No, that is not going to work.” Muteba recalled, “People started to throw rocks at the mayor, and the mayor ran away. And, when the mayor fled, the digging *really* started.”

Odilon Kajumba Kilanga is a *creuseur* who has worked in the Kolwezi area for fifteen years. He grew up in southern Congo’s largest city, Lubumbashi, which is near the Zambian border, and as a teen-ager he worked odd jobs, including selling tires by the roadside. One day when he was eighteen, a friend who had moved to Kolwezi called him and urged him to join a coöperative of *creuseurs* which roamed from mine to mine, sharing profits. “There were good sites that you could just turn up to and work,” Kajumba said, when we met in Kolwezi.

In those days, it took eight hours to get from Lubumbashi to Kolwezi by bus,

on a rutted two-lane road. The thickets on either side of the highway crawled with outlaws, who occasionally hijacked vehicles using weapons they’d leased from impoverished soldiers. Once, bandits stopped a bus and ordered the passengers to strip; the hijackers took everything, even people’s underwear.

Kajumba knew that the journey to Kolwezi was dangerous, but he said of the *creuseurs*, “If they tell you to come, you come.” At first, the work, though strenuous, was exciting; he began each shift dreaming of riches. He had some stretches of good luck, but he never made the big score that would transform his life. Now in his mid-thirties, he is a laconic man who becomes animated only when he is discussing God or his favorite soccer team, TP Mazembe. Mining no longer holds romance for him; he sees the work as a symptom of his poverty rather than as a path out of it. When you are a *creuseur*, he said, you are “obliged to do what you can to make ends meet,” and this necessity trumps any fears about personal safety. “To be scared, you must first have means,” he said.

Kajumba joined the mining economy relatively late in life. In Kolwezi, children as young as three learn to pick out the purest ore from rock slabs. Soon enough, they are lugging ore for adult *creuseurs*. Teen-age boys often work perilous shifts navigating rickety shafts. Near large mines, the prostitution of women and young girls is pervasive. Other women wash raw mining material, which is often full of toxic metals and, in some cases, mildly radioactive. If a pregnant woman works with such heavy metals as cobalt, it can increase her chances of having a stillbirth or a child with birth defects. According to a recent study in *The Lancet*, women in southern Congo “had metal concentrations that are among the highest ever reported for pregnant women.” The study also found a strong link between fathers who worked with mining chemicals and fetal abnormalities in their children, noting that “paternal occupational mining exposure was the factor most strongly associated with birth defects.”

This year, cobalt prices have jumped some forty per cent, to more than twenty dollars a pound. The lure of mineral riches in a country as poor as Congo provides irresistible temptation for politicians and officials to steal and cheat.

Soldiers who have been posted to Kolwezi during periods of unrest have been known to lay down their Kalashnikovs at night and enter the mines. At a meeting of investors in 2019, Simon Tuma Waku, then the president of the Chamber of Mines in Congo, used the language of a gold rush: “Cobalt—it makes you dream.”

After Kasulo’s mayor fled, many residents began tearing away at the ground beneath them. Some wealthier locals hired *creuseurs* to dig under their houses, with an agreement to split the profits. Two teams of *creuseurs* could each work twelve-hour shifts, chipping at the rock with hammers and chisels. A pastor and his congregation began digging under their church, stopping only for Sunday services.

By the end of 2014, two thousand *creuseurs* were working in the neighborhood, with little regulation. Kajumba and his coöperative soon joined in the hunt for minerals. One man on Kajumba’s team, Yannick Mputu, remembers this period as “the good times.” He told me, “There was a lot of money, and everybody was able to make some. The minerals were close to the surface, and they could be mined without digging deep holes.”

But the conditions quickly became dangerous. Not long after the mayor formally prohibited excavating for minerals, a mine shaft collapsed, killing five miners. Still, people kept digging, and by the time researchers for Amnesty International visited, less than a year after the discovery of cobalt in Kasulo, some of the holes made by *creuseurs* were a hundred feet deep. Once diggers reached seams of ore, they followed the mineral through the soil, often without building supports for their tunnels. As Murray Hitzman, the former U.S.G.S. scientist, pointed out, the heterogenite closest to the surface often contains the least cobalt, because of weathering. *Creuseurs* in Kasulo were risking their lives to obtain some of the worst ore.

One of Kajumba’s teammates told me that their coöperative of six used to regularly extract two tons of raw material from a single pit in Kasulo. But most of the best sites were quickly excavated, and the yield from newer pits was less than half as much. The team was also ripped off by unscrupulous traders and corrupt

officials. Kajumba said that lately he has struggled to pay his rent of twenty-five dollars a month. "Whenever we dig up a few tons, I send some money to my family," he added.

Drug and alcohol use are rampant among *creuseurs*. Kajumba said that, though many people he knew in Kasulo wasted all their earnings on narcotics, he avoided such temptations. Whenever I met up with him, he made a point of drinking a cola.

Children who work in the mines are often drugged, in order to suppress hunger. Sister Catherine Mutindi, the founder of Good Shepherd Kolwezi, a Catholic charity that tries to stop child labor, said, "If the kids don't make enough money, they have no food for the whole day. Some children we interviewed did not remember the last time they had a meal."

Researchers estimate that thousands of children work in mining in Kolwezi alone. Mark Canavera, a faculty member at Columbia University who focusses on child welfare, has spent time in Kolwezi. "I don't think the government has any capacity to monitor children's involvement in this," he told me. "Even if it did, it doesn't have a framework for thinking about what is child labor and what isn't." In such a poor region, parents often expect their children to supplement the family's income, even if the work is dangerous.

At a school run by Good Shepherd, I met Ziki, a serious boy with large dark eyes. He was fifteen but, because he had been malnourished for long periods, he looked much younger. His parents had been killed in a roadside accident when he was three; afterward, he was sent to live with his father's sister. "My aunt sent her kids to school but sent me to the mines," he said. "I was full of bitterness." He joined a team of boys who roved across Kolwezi.

I was initially skeptical that Ziki had begun working at such a young age, but Mutindi said that she has seen many such cases. "The younger children of four, five, six, seven, these will mainly be collecting—picking stones," she said. "It's amazing how they know the value." Children are eventually given such jobs as washing ore or carrying heavy sacks of rocks to traders who loiter near the sites on motorcycles. When I visited Kolwezi, streams alongside the city's

main roads teemed with women and children washing minerals.

As Ziki and his friends grew older, they began entering pits dug by *creuseurs*. The tunnels were square, four or five feet across, and about sixteen feet deep. It was infernally hot inside them, and oxygen was scarce. "As you were descending, there were rocks that you held on to," he recalled. "If you held on to the wrong rock and it loosened from the wall, you would tumble into the hole. I would bump into older people who were going down into the pits, and they would tell us, 'You children, if you enter you will die.'"

Ziki worked at mine sites around Kolwezi for eleven years. Although Congo's government periodically claimed that it was cracking down on child labor, few adults tried to stop him from working. "Soldiers would hunt us," he recalled. "If they caught you, they would beat you." He went on, "If you sold your minerals, when you had money, there were street kids, thugs, who could stop you on the road and snatch your money. To pass safely, you had to pay five hundred francs"—about fifty cents—"so you could have safe passage. If you gave them nothing, they would beat you."

Copper has been mined in Congo since at least the fourth century, and the deposits were known to Portuguese slave traders from the fifteenth century onward. Cobalt is a byproduct of copper production. In 1885, Belgium's King Leo-

pold II claimed the country as his private property and brutally exploited it for rubber; according to "King Leopold's Ghost," a 1998 book by Adam Hochschild, as many as ten million Congolese were killed. But, because of local resistance and the inaccessibility of the region, large-scale commercial mining didn't begin in the south until the twentieth century.

Kolwezi was founded in 1937 by the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, a mining monopoly created by Belgian royal decree. These colonialists may not have matched the atrocities of King Leopold, but they still saw the country in starkly exploitative terms. They understood that the best way to extract Congo's mineral wealth quickly was to create infrastructure. The company cleared the thickets of thorny acacias and miombo trees that had grown atop Kolwezi's rich mineral deposits and built the town across the area's rolling hills, with wide streets and bungalows for Europeans, whose neighborhoods were segregated from those where Congolese workers lived. Locals were used to create this infrastructure, and to labor in the mines, but, as Hitzman put it, "the whites ran everything."

After independence, the southernmost province, Katanga, was viewed as a prize by Cold War powers. In the sixties, Katanga unsuccessfully tried to secede, with the support of Belgium and the Union Minière. Then, in 1978,



"Something less wise and more bad boy."

Soviet-armed and Cuban-trained rebels seized Kolwezi and several hundred civilians were killed. Before the insurrection, the Soviet Union appeared to have been stockpiling cobalt, and, according to a report by the C.I.A., the attack set off “a round of panic buying and hoarding in the developed West.” Cobalt, the report declared, “is one of the most critical industrial metals.” Then, as now, the mineral was used in the manufacture of corrosion-resistant alloys for aircraft engines and gas turbines.

The West’s solution to the market instability was to prop up the country’s dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, who presided over an almost farcically kleptocratic regime. The country’s elite sustained themselves, in part, on the profits from the mines. Gécamines, a state-controlled mining company, ran a virtual monopoly in Katanga’s copper-and-cobalt belt, and owned swaths of the cities that had been built to house miners.

By the early nineties, Mobutu and his cronies seemed to have stolen everything they could, and Congo was falling apart. As the country drifted toward civil war, the Army pillaged Gécamines, and former workers sold off minerals and machine parts in order to feed their families. In 1997, Mobutu went into exile. The disintegration of Gécamines transformed Congo’s mining landscape. *Creuseurs* began digging at the company’s largely abandoned sites, selling ore to foreign traders who had stayed behind after Mobutu was deposed.

Congo became mired in a series of wars in which more people were killed than in any other conflict since the Second World War. The country’s next leader, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, was assassinated, in 2001, and his son Joseph took over. Both Kabilas funded their war efforts by selling Gécamines sites to foreigners. By the time Hitzman arrived, in the mid-twenties, Gécamines had become a shell. “Some of the best geologists I’ve ever met in my life were still working for Gécamines, and hadn’t been paid for three years,” Hitzman said. “It was sad as hell.”

Some *creuseurs* in Odilon Kajumba Kilanga’s collective used to work for Gécamines. Yannick Mputu, who is from

Likasi, three hours east of Kolwezi, told me that he once reprocessed tailings at a company mine in his home town, adding, “When Gécamines closed, we had to go to Kolwezi.”

The collective regularly sneaked into open-pit mines that are now owned by companies like the Swiss multinational Glencore. “We enter at night, we work, and leave early in the morning,” Mputu told me. He noted that *creuseurs* put something aside for the soldiers and the police who supposedly prohibit outsiders from entering: “We give them a percentage of our earnings, and they let us in.”

In June, 2019, more than forty *creuseurs* were killed in a landslide after breaking into a Glencore-owned mine in Kolwezi. Kajumba and his friends were also at the site that night, but they were working a different seam. “The worst thing I’ve seen as a miner is the sheer number of dead bodies when there were cave-ins,” Kajumba said. The night after the Glencore landslide, a mining-company employee told me, “people snuck back in and continued digging.”

Videos of Kasulo taken during the height of the 2014 cobalt rush show orange tarpaulins covering fresh pits and bags of minerals littering the streets. Michael Kavanagh, a journalist, visited the district a year later, and published an article in the *Times* observing that the profusion of holes made it look “as if it had been bombed.” At one point, after *creuseurs* tunnelled beneath the main road running west to Angola, the road collapsed.

Kajumba and his team were part of this initial frenzy. They knew that picking at the rock beneath Kasulo’s sandy soil was treacherous, especially during the rainy season, but they were happy not to be risking arrest, as they were when they broke into the big mines. One day in December, 2014, Kajumba and other *creuseurs* were working a pit at Kasulo when they felt a rumble. “It was as if something was falling deep underneath us,” Kajumba recalled. They knew that, the previous day, a group of *creuseurs* working in a neighboring hole had asked a local chief to perform a ritual over a

new area where they had been digging. *Creuseurs*, many of whom have little formal education and enter pits every day fearing that they might die, can be superstitious. Magic practitioners, known as *féticheurs*, are sometimes employed in the hope of increasing the chances that a fresh pit will contain bounties of cobalt and copper.

Such rituals are often benign, but they can have a sinister side. Among the prevailing superstitions in the region is a belief that having sex with a virgin girl will enhance one’s luck in the mines. While I was in Kolwezi, Mutindi, of Good Shepherd, showed me photographs of the bruised corpse of an eight-year-old girl who had been abducted and raped by a *creuseur* the previous week. (The miner was later apprehended; she sent me a video of him in prison.) Children frequently die while being raped. In one case, Mutindi said, she saw the body of an eighteen-month-old infant who had been raped by a *creuseur*.

At Kasulo, the *féticheur* who had performed the ritual over the neighboring pit had warned the miners not to enter it for three days, to avoid angering a dragon that, he said, lived at the bottom. The *creuseurs* were told that the pit would then be safe—and full of minerals. Rumors of the pit’s riches spread, and a day later some miners decided to disobey the *féticheur*. “*Creuseurs* have curiosity,” Mputu said. “They wanted to see what was down there.”

After Kajumba and Mputu felt the ground shudder, they rushed to the neighboring hole. Part of the tunnel had caved in, trapping their neighbors deep below. Some fifty people vaulted into the darkness, desperate to save their friends. Rescuers nearly suffocated in the subterranean passages. Eleven of the trapped miners died, as did four rescuers.

Following another series of *féticheur* rituals, and another period of waiting, all the bodies were pulled from the hole. Some were horrifically burned. “The last person who escaped from the pit said that he saw a huge flame,” Mputu told me. The fire’s origin was unclear, but artisanal miners can unearth pockets of flammable gas. To Mputu and his colleagues, the accident had supernatural trappings. “The cause of the flame was none other than the dragon,” he told me.



LEFT OUT OF THE BIBLE

What Adam said to Eve
As they lay in the dark.
Honey, what's making
That dog out there bark?

—Charles Simic

Nine months after the cave-in, another group of *creuseurs* in Kasulo burned a tire in an underground gallery, in an attempt to crack open a stubborn rock face. Five people asphyxiated from the fumes; thirteen others were hospitalized. After the incident, Radio Okapi, a media group sponsored by the United Nations, interviewed Kolwezi's mayor, who said that a year earlier he had sent a report to his superiors urging the closure of the artisanal pits. According to Radio Okapi, the mayor "expressed regret that no site was closed because of this request." The report noted that more than a thousand holes had been dug in Kasulo.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was reorganized in 2015, and Kolwezi became the new capital of a region called Lualaba. The first governor of Lualaba, Richard Muyej Mangez Mans, promoted himself as Papa Solution. In Kolwezi, many benches at bus stops were painted with his nickname. In an interview with the magazine *Mining and Business*, Muyej spoke critically of the cobalt "contagion" in Kasulo. "A plan is needed to avoid hasty movements that could turn into a humanitarian tragedy," he said. "We have made a project proposal that we will submit to the authorities."

The proposal, which Muyej didn't disclose at the time, involved granting the mineral rights at Kasulo to a foreign company: Congo Dongfang International Mining, a subsidiary of Zhejiang Huayou, a Chinese conglomerate that, among other things, has supplied materials for iPhone batteries. China is the world's largest producer of lithium-ion batteries, and Huayou has made a huge investment in Congo. After acquiring mineral rights in the region, in 2015, it built two cobalt refineries. According to an internal presentation, by 2017 Huayou

controlled twenty-one per cent of the global cobalt market. (A Huayou spokesperson said that Congo Dongfang followed international standards in developing Kasulo, and plans to "gradually eradicate all forms of human-rights violation with a responsible supply chain.")

China and Congo have a long history. During Leopold's reign, Chinese workers were shipped to Congo to help build the national railroad. In the nineteen-seventies, Mobutu turned to Mao's regime for technical collaboration on infrastructure projects. By the nineties, the Chinese were becoming the bosses: the Beijing government and myriad Chinese businesses began making heavy investments in Africa, particularly in resource-rich and regulation-poor countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Peter Zhou, a Chinese-born financier who has worked on a few mining deals in Congo, said that in such countries "there is corruption, there is lack of the rule of law, which gives you more autonomy to be entrepreneurial." (Zhou emphasized that he hadn't directly witnessed or engaged in corruption.) In 2007, Joseph Kabila made a six-billion-dollar infrastructure deal with China that included a provision allowing the Chinese to extract six hundred thousand tons of cobalt.

The journalist Howard French, in his 2014 book, "China's Second Continent," writes that in Zambia, Congo's neighbor, Chinese companies invested so extensively in copper mines that the flood of foreign money was said to be influencing elections. Beijing was blamed for increasing Africa's debt burden, and an essay in the magazine *New African* accused China of "a new form of colonialism."

These days, most of the cobalt in southern Congo comes from industrial mines, which are largely owned by Chi-

nese companies. In 2016, China Molybdenum paid the U.S. company Freeport-McMoRan \$2.65 billion for a controlling stake in Tenke Fungurume, a giant copper-and-cobalt mine about two hours east of Kolwezi; three years later, China Molybdenum acquired another stake, for \$1.14 billion. Zhou, who worked on the Tenke Fungurume deal, divided the current Chinese involvement in Congo into two phases. At first, he said, companies had to take significant financial risks, because "there was a lack of infrastructure—the cost base is high to transport all the materials." They also had to pay bribes to government officials and Gécamines executives. During this phase, Chinese companies were incentivized to make money by whatever means possible. "If you conduct your business without, you know, a proper return, then you can't justify the risk," Zhou told me. During this period, he said, mines had few safety protections.

With sufficient infrastructure in place, Zhou went on, the "Chinese are now conducting business in a more moral way. They have to keep the people in a peaceful mind-set, so they started to build a social relationship—training locals in how to grow out their culture, their schools." He continued, "There's less gray conduct now, and more of a sort of transparent business."

In 2017, Chinese workers arrived in the village of Samukinda, half an hour northwest of Kasulo, and quickly constructed two dozen houses with corrugated-iron roofs. Kasulo residents were ordered to leave their neighborhood within two weeks. The Congolese government revealed that a mining permit had been granted to Congo Dongfang, which would remove the topsoil and then wall off what had once been the neighborhood. *Creuseurs* from an approved cooperative would be allowed to mine the site, and Congo Dongfang would become the exclusive buyer of Kasulo's ore.

Congo Dongfang offered the families of Kasulo either a lump sum for their plots—up to twenty-five hundred dollars—or a new home in Samukinda. A consortium of local organizations wrote to Governor Muyej, protesting that the evictions were illegal, but he pressed on. Muteba, the baker, told me that on a rainy day a couple of months later, employees



"I'm starting to think this is a marriage that should have been an e-mail."

of Congo Dongfang "came with huge trucks to crush our houses."

Around this time, Joseph Kabila announced that, after eighteen years in office, he would not run for reelection. In January, 2019, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo became President. The following spring, I met with Governor Muyej at his fortified compound in the center of Kolwezi. Muyej said that Tshisekedi would likely maintain the course set by Kabila—"a flight that we must take to get out of poverty."

Muyej told me that he hoped to diversify the local economy through tourism and agriculture. Mining, he said, exacerbated inequalities—"enormous mineral wealth beside a population that lives in enormous precarity." In 2018, *Forbes* praised Muyej's governorship as "a model for bringing together economic prosperity, political transparency and social impact." Yet it's hard to imagine Kolwezi becoming a travel destination anytime soon. On a recent trip there, I tried to visit Katebi Lodge, a new lakeside resort. At the entrance, a metal gate topped with barbed wire, I was shooed away by

a police officer toting a Kalashnikov. Apparently, the lake was too polluted to allow visitors.

Muyej often cited the building of a new governorate office—a gaudy structure rising above a sea of ramshackle cinder-block houses—to show how he had modernized Kolwezi. Renovations of the local soccer stadium and the town's central roundabout, which features a statue of mine workers, were financed by mining companies.

Muyej told me that he hoped to reform the mining sector, in part, by reducing child labor and by centralizing the market where traders buy cobalt, thus instilling transparency in the supply chain. Critics have called such reforms cynical bids to control and tax artisanal production for personal gain. Muyej, his family, and officials close to him have profited from the mining boom. The Governor's son Yves is the C.E.O. of a logistics company in Kolwezi; on LinkedIn, one of his employees describes himself as the site supervisor of the Congo Dongfang mine. Muyej's cabinet chief, Yav Katshung, is a lawyer whose

firm does work for Congo Dongfang. (Katshung and Yves Muyej both declined to speak to me.)

Muyej said that as many as a hundred and seventy thousand *creuseurs* work informally in his province. Among the forty or so sites where artisanal miners are employed as day laborers is the Congo Dongfang mine in Kasulo. Only eight hundred or so *creuseurs* work there, however, and that has stoked resentment. Jacques Kayembe, the president of an artisanal mining collective, told me, "Kasulo is a village that is built on mineral deposits, but not enough *creuseurs* can legally work on official artisanal deposits, and that's a problem."

Whenever Muyej tried to reason with *creuseurs* who had sneaked onto industrial concessions, he was attacked with stones, and in 2019 there was so much unrest in Kolwezi that the military was sent in. It has become common to see soldiers carrying machine guns and rocket launchers around the city. When I first visited the area, in 2019, a toll booth outside the city was riddled with bullet holes. A local journalist travelling with me said that a policeman at the booth had recently been murdered by gangsters.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, Congo's south has endured a series of lockdowns. Kajumba said that *creuseurs* like him "continue to work, but the situation is difficult." Companies have furloughed workers, adding to their frustration. Several months ago, a Congolese friend sent me a video of miners protesting for back pay at a Chinese-run mine in Kolwezi. As pandemic restrictions continued, my friend sent me footage of protesters burning tires in the streets.

Last year, the Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa announced that two Congolese citizens had leaked documents revealing numerous improprieties at Afriland First Bank, a Cameroon-based institution where Muyej had at least one account. Muyej, it was revealed, had been moving hundreds of thousands of dollars through the bank. He is now under investigation in Congo for corruption, and his vice-governor is running Lua-laba. According to Radio France Internationale, the Congolese authorities have accused Muyej of not being able to justify forty per cent of his cabinet's expenses. (A representative for Muyej said that the Governor had done nothing wrong,

and welcomed an audit of his finances.)

Huge sums of money continue to change hands in the region. In December, China Molybdenum paid Freeport-McMoRan half a billion dollars to acquire a controlling stake in Kisanfu, a copper-and-cobalt concession east of Kolwezi. At a recent conference sponsored by the *Financial Times*, Ivan Glasenberg, the C.E.O. of Glencore, said, “China, Inc., has realized how important cobalt is.” He continued, “They’ve gone and tied up the supply.” He warned that if Chinese companies stopped exporting batteries, this could hamper the ability of non-Chinese companies to produce electric vehicles. Last month, CATL, a Chinese conglomerate that develops and manufactures lithium-ion batteries, acquired a hundred-and-thirty-seven-million-dollar stake in the Kisanfu mine. Tesla works with the company to make its car batteries, and CATL has supplied batteries to Apple. Recently, according to witnesses at Kisanfu, a cave-in killed at least four *creuseurs*.

In the spring of 2019, I visited the Congo Dongfang mine in Kasulo, escorted by company representatives. Signs by the gate said that children and pregnant women were forbidden to enter. Inside the compound, the land that had once been a bustling neighborhood was now a giant red crater. (I saw no children during my visit, but Kajumba told me that they still find their way in.) My minders cautioned me not to wander too close to the *creuseurs*, as they were liable to be violent. Not long before my arrival, a group of them had set some company trucks on fire.

Kajumba said that Congolese had been employed to mediate between the *creuseurs* and company officials. Often, the *creuseurs*’ demands were not met and they went on strike. “You go in to work and say, ‘No, I won’t do anything,’” Kajumba said. “The Chinese will feel unsafe and call in the police.” The police, he said, do the company’s bidding: “They know they will get a gift from the Chinese, so they will threaten you with tear-gas and batons.” Kajumba said that he had been teargassed by police at Kasulo: “Everyone ran to save his life. We felt defenseless.”

At some sites, the treatment of Congolese by their Chinese bosses is remi-

niscient of the colonial period. In a video shared with me by Mutindi, of Good Shepherd, a Congolese guard with a Kalashnikov slung across his back beats a man who is lying, semi-naked, in mud, his arms bound. Behind the camera, a man otherwise speaking Mandarin starts yelling “*Piga!*”—the Kiswahili word for “beat.” In the background are seven of the trucks that Congo Dongfang uses to transport cobalt ore.

Upon my arrival at the mine, I had been given a long explanation of safety protocols, but as I approached the *creuseurs* it was clear that they had only rudimentary equipment. Plastic jerricans, cut roughly in half and tied to ropes, were being used to haul ore. Many *creuseurs* were shoeless, and I saw none wearing helmets or goggles, despite the fact that a confidential 2018 audit, by the Korean conglomerate LG Chem, had criticized the site for a lack of proper safety equipment.

Some *creuseurs* washed ore in dirty ponds by the pits. “The Chinese are cheating us,” one of them murmured. “They’re telling us the ore is less pure than it is.” Kajumba said that he had stopped working at Kasulo six months earlier because he felt that he was being treated unfairly. “It’s as if you were working to suffer even more,” he told me.

In a warehouse at the site, I watched a man, his face grim, pulverizing ore on a concrete floor as two Chinese overseers scrutinized *creuseurs* from behind a barrier of chicken wire. No Chinese employee interacted with me, and nobody responded when I waved in greeting.

One night in Kolwezi, I went to a Chinese-run casino with a few Congolese friends. I was immediately allowed inside, but they were stopped at the door and told that they could not gamble. Black Africans, the casino’s staff explained, can’t be trusted with money. At a roulette table, a host of drunken white South Africans addressed a Congolese croupier as “Black man.”

It’s unclear how many Chinese live in Congo, though estimates range from fewer than ten thousand to as many as a hundred thousand. Before the pandemic, Ethiopian Airlines’ daily flights from Addis Ababa into Lubumbashi were filled with Chinese passengers. When these workers arrive in a mining

town, signs in Mandarin guide them to Chinese-run hotels, shops, and restaurants. Outside work, the Chinese rarely mingle with the locals. Very few of them know French or Kiswahili, the most commonly spoken languages of Congo’s south. In a 2017 essay, the Congolese political scientist Germain Ngoie Tshibambe wrote that many Chinese find their time in Congo lonely and difficult. “It is no paradise for migrants,” he noted.

Few locals patronize Chinese restaurants, which tend to be relatively expensive and not to their taste, but Chinese health clinics have become popular. The clinics offer a rare opportunity for casual social interaction—perhaps more so than at the mines themselves. In 2011, Jean Jolly, a French journalist, reported that one of Congo Dongfang’s directors of external relations had never visited the mine that he represented, two miles away.

Congolese who work at Chinese-run mines said that their supervisors were often racist. A Congolese translator who speaks Mandarin told me, “Chinese people are coming here for business to make money, so they can never be our friends.” He had overheard Chinese employers saying of the Congolese, “These people, they don’t really *think*.”

Creuseurs around Kolwezi frequently complained to me that Chinese-owned mines had replicated the harsh conditions of China’s own mining industry. Congolese often say, “If they work without shoes there, how can they be expected to give us shoes to work here?” A Western mine official told me he had visited a mine in Congo, owned by a small Chinese company, that had many Chinese laborers. It reminded him of an internment camp: “The Chinese were barefoot, they were digging with shovels, and they couldn’t leave.”

Peter Zhou, the Chinese-born financier, referred to the locals in Congo as his “Congolese brothers,” and argued that many big Chinese-run mines in the region had implemented strong safety standards. Recalling his first visit to southern Congo, Zhou said, “I wasn’t too surprised about the poverty, because I grew up in Shanxi Province, in the interior of China.” When he met with Congolese families in roughly constructed homes, he was reminded of the cinder-block rooms of his youth.

Zhou acknowledged that there was

“a lot of corruption” in Congo’s mining sector, but he maintained that, with enough economic prosperity, the gray economy in Congo will fade, much as it has in China. “My Western friends come to it and say, ‘There are significant risks associated with business here,’” he said. “I see something familiar.”

During one of my visits to Kolwezi, Kajumba invited me to the cramped room that he shares with Yannick Mputu and Mputu’s brother, Trésor. I followed Kajumba down an alley in one of the town’s sprawling working-class neighborhoods. We entered a courtyard, hung with drying linens, that smelled strongly of sewage, then passed through a green doorframe covered with printed fabric.

Inside, the walls were painted various bright colors. Above a bed facing an old cathode-ray television was a rack of neatly pressed suits, shirts, and jackets, many with natty checks and patterns. Even though Kajumba struggles to get by, he keeps up with the latest fashions. On the day that I visited, he was wearing an orange gingham button-down paired with a black-and-white-speckled baseball cap.

Creuseurs take pride in the ingenuity required to do their job well, and some of them told me that they like the irregular working hours. But Trésor Mputu, who has two children living in Likasi, told me, “As a father, I wouldn’t accept my son going to the mines.” Yannick nodded. “I would want, through my labors, to enable my children to go further,” he said. “I want them to be able to study in good conditions, and for them to be able to leave the country to develop themselves.”

Even if artisanal mining supports poor families in the region, it’s hard to applaud it. The lives of most *creuseurs* are short and marked by suffering. Many

have physical and psychological injuries from mine collapses and other accidents, and from violent confrontations with the police and the Army. Ziki, the former child *creuseur*, recalled an incident that took place when he was about twelve: “One Friday, we were sitting down, and soldiers came into the mine—they caught us. They threw us to the ground. They sprayed us with water and then began to whip us. We began to cry and ask for mercy. And we swore to them that we would never come again to this place.”

Soon afterward, Ziki left his group of friends, who had begun drinking and smoking heavily, and wandered around mine sites by himself. He began sleeping at sites, eating little and being abused by soldiers. At one point, he was taken hostage by older *creuseurs* who accused him of stealing their wares. In a stroke of luck, members of a CBS News crew met him while he was washing minerals. They encouraged his family to take him and his siblings out of the mines. “They asked my grandmother, ‘Aren’t these children capable of studying?’” he said. “My grandmother promised to take us back to school.” (CBS viewers donated money for their schooling.)

I asked Ziki what he thought of people who profited from cobalt mining. “I have sadness in my heart when I think of people who buy the minerals,” he said. “They make so much money, and we have to stay like this.” When I told him that Americans paid more than a thousand dollars for the latest iPhone, he replied, “It really hurts me to hear that.”

The companies that use lithium-ion batteries periodically respond to public pressure about the conditions in cobalt mines by promising to clean up their supply chains and innovate their way out of the problem. There is also a financial

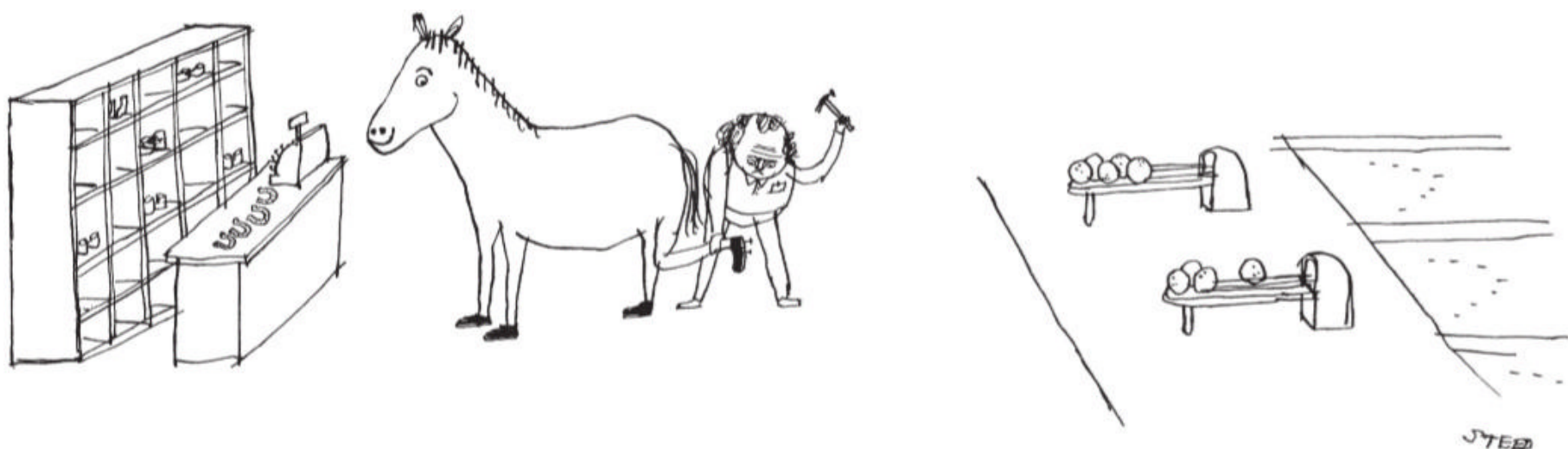
incentive to do so: cobalt is one of a battery’s most expensive elements.

Last year, Tesla pledged to use lithium-iron-phosphate batteries, which do not contain cobalt, in some of its electric cars. Huayou stock plummeted. Still, Reuters noted, “it was not clear to what extent Tesla intends to use L.F.P. batteries,” and the company “has no plans to stop” using batteries that contain cobalt. (L.F.P. batteries aren’t used in cell phones: to achieve the required voltage, the batteries would have to be doubled up, adding unacceptable bulk and heft.)

After Amnesty International published a report on unethical cobalt mining, in 2016, Apple issued a statement saying that it “believes every worker in our supply chain has a right to safe, ethical working conditions,” and that “underage labor is never tolerated.” The following year, after a report by Sky News showed that cobalt mined by children was still being used in the company’s devices, Apple suspended purchases of hand-mined cobalt, but once the media attention died down the practice continued. Huayou remains part of Apple’s supply chain.

In December, 2019, attorneys from International Rights Advocates, a law firm in Washington, D.C., sued Apple, Google, Dell, Microsoft, and Tesla for involvement in the injuries or deaths of child miners. “These boys are working under Stone Age conditions for paltry wages, and at immense personal risk, to provide cobalt,” the complaint alleges. “The hundreds of billions of dollars generated by the Defendants each year would not be possible without cobalt mined in the D.R.C.”

Terry Collingsworth, the lawyer for the plaintiffs, believes that the brutal conditions must have been apparent from the start. “I can’t imagine that a company like Apple would become dependent upon



a supply chain without having spent quite a bit of time on the ground,” he told me. In response, Apple said that it had been improving standards since 2014 and contended that it is “constantly working to raise the bar for ourselves, and the industry.” It also said that it had made innovations in cobalt recycling. (In August, 2020, the companies being sued jointly filed a motion to dismiss, and in October the plaintiffs filed a brief in opposition.)

The outcry over working conditions has led industry players to found the Fair Cobalt Alliance, an organization that, among other things, supports small-scale mining with safety equipment and clean water. The group is now present at Kasulo and at another site. Glencore, Huayou, and Tesla have joined the alliance.

Ziki, who is now in school, likes studying and playing soccer, and administrators have given him basic supplies to take home to his family. When I asked him what he hoped for in life, he replied, “I have the hope that I can become the governor!”

One Sunday morning, I met Kajumba and Trésor Mputu at the Temple Évangélique de Carmel, a hangar-style megachurch in the center of Kolwezi. The sign outside proclaims that it is the “thirtieth Pentecostal community in Congo.” Kajumba and Mputu attend services every Sunday. “When someone finds themselves in difficulties, they can come to the church, they can pray,” Kajumba said.

Inside, people swayed and sang, their hands outstretched. A few congregants spoke in tongues. On a stage covered with flowers, one of the pastors declared that the church was “worth more than any enterprise.” He promised that spiritual riches awaited even his poorest parishioners.

After church, Kajumba, Mputu, and I went to a local bar to watch the broadcast of a soccer match between a Malagasy team and TP Mazembe, which is passionately supported throughout the south. When Mazembe scored the first goal, Kajumba smiled. Suddenly, the television crackled, and the programming switched to another game, in Kinshasa, the nation’s capital. “They always forget us down here in the south,” someone said. Kajumba sighed and said that he should probably head home.

One day, driving north out of Kolwezi, I noticed how deeply faith permeated everything around me: the Mount Carmel health clinic, the Salon Apocalypse hairdresser, the Light of God tire shop. Eventually, the road became unpaved. Trucks carrying sulfuric acid threw up plumes of dust as they trundled toward factories where raw minerals are processed.

I turned onto a side road and crossed a creek where men, women, and children were washing cobalt ore. On the other side lay a cluster of mud-brick houses. This was Samukinda, the village where new houses had been built for the exiled residents of Kasulo.

The sun was punishingly hot that day, and I was grateful when Nama Mavu, the local chief, invited me into her home for a chat. “My ancestors came from Angola, and they set up the village in 1941,” she said. On her parlor wall there was an image of Jesus, and a poster advertising a copper-and-cobalt mine. “My ancestors came here to build the railroad, and, when the construction of the railroad finished, they stayed.”

For years, the villagers farmed the surrounding bush, growing large crops of manioc, but about a decade ago the land became polluted after some foreign businessmen opened a cobalt-processing plant nearby. This left no source of employment for the villagers, except as low-paid day laborers. In 2018, the residents of Kasulo who had been displaced by the Congo Dongfang mine began to arrive.

As I walked through the village, children laughed and pointed at me, shouting “Chinese! Chinese!” Mavu said that the villagers were seldom visited by foreigners, even though their factories and mines now surrounded the town. She assigned two young men to escort me to the houses that Congo Dongfang had built. A row of modern-looking white buildings rose in the distance. As they came into focus, it was clear that their construction was slapdash.

Few of the homes were even occupied, as most of the original residents of Kasulo had accepted money instead. Those families who had chosen to take a house had been shown a brochure with beautiful pictures. But the homes turned out to have no electricity or bathrooms. The roofs leaked, and the well at the corner of the development was

dry. Most of the families moved away.

Muteba, the baker, was one of the few arrivals from Kasulo who had remained in Samukinda. Now in his seventies and retired, he wore a soiled lab coat over his emaciated body. He welcomed me into his house, which was stifling hot. The roof was only roughly attached to the walls. He had dug himself a lavatory pit, which was covered with a board. “The water here, it’s not good,” he said. “The smell of acid and pollutants comes out of any hole we try to dig for water.”

Muteba, who was ill with diarrhea, wistfully recalled his home in Kasulo. “It was a big parcel of land,” he said. “It had at least fifteen trees—avocado trees, mango trees. All this was mine.” He continued, “We were chased out of our homes like animals, and now we suffer like strangers.”

Mavu told me that her village can hardly support its own inhabitants, much less the new ones from Kasulo. She has no means of transport, and Governor Muyej has refused to come and see her in order to take stock of the village’s problems. She asked me to change about twenty dollars’ worth of Zambian money that she had carefully folded away after making a trade with food importers. There is no school at Samukinda, and the nearest shops are miles away.

During my meeting with Governor Muyej, I raised some of the complaints I had heard at Samukinda. He insisted that I had “a bad comprehension of the issues.” He promised to address the dry well and the poor housing construction. When I returned to the village, five months later, Mavu told me that Papa Solution still hadn’t sent anyone: “All that has changed is that I am older.”

At the end of my first visit to Samukinda, I noticed mining tailings spread across a path. The residents had put them there to check erosion during the rainy season. I wondered if the tailings contained any cobalt, and a young villager told me that they probably did—after all, the entire region rested on mineral deposits. I then asked him if the residents of Samukinda had considered digging beneath the village. The young man shrugged and said that the people in his village didn’t want to suffer the same fate as those in Kasulo. Then he made a prediction: “In the end, they will come and kick us out of here.” ♦



Saïd
Sayrafiezadeh
A, S, D, F

By the time six o'clock is about to roll around, I'm beginning to wonder if working in an art gallery is taking some sort of toll on my psyche. One part of the problem is that I haven't done anything all day, since there hasn't been anything to do, and the other part of the problem is something I can't quite name yet. This is the moment when the owner emerges from his back office—three minutes before six—holding a two-page handwritten letter that he needs me to type right now, because there's a collector on the West Coast who might be interested in "Untitled X."

"One more thing before you go," he says, as if the list of today's tasks has been long.

"I'd be happy to," I tell him. I'm full of good cheer and work ethic. I was hired a month ago, and I want the owner to think of me as a team player—but the truth is I don't get paid for overtime.

The truth is I've spent today the way I spend most days, sitting behind the front desk for nine hours, less one hour for lunch, engulfed in a sea of silence and serenity, waiting for something to happen, while I gaze into the middle distance of white walls hung with Abstract Expressionism. This is the art of seventy years ago, the art of art, the art of ideas, the art of Rorschach, lines, shapes, splashes, repudiating verisimilitude and easy answers, sixty by sixty, and selling for five figures if the owner's lucky. No, we don't have Pollocks or de Koonings, we have the ones no one's heard of, the ones that don't go for seven figures, and that don't hang in the Denver Art Museum, where I worked in the café before getting my act together to send out art-related résumés across the state of Colorado. "Executed optimal operations during peak hours," I wrote in my cover letter—business-speak poached from the Internet but accurate nonetheless.

Today, the only visitor was the mailman at noon, who put his big blue bag on my Formica front desk and spent a few minutes making small talk about sports and the weather, which was cloudless and cool, because in Aspen it's always cloudless and cool. A month ago, I was living in Denver, where it was also

cloudless and cool. The mailman spoke too loudly for an upscale art gallery with a library-like atmosphere—"CLOUDLESS AND COOL"—but no one was here to hear him. Before he left, I tried to get him to stay longer, saying plaintively, "I can give you a personal tour if you like," but he thought I was talking about Aspen. "I've lived here my whole life," he said.

Now it's six hours later, twelve past six to be exact, and I'm doing my best to type out two pages of handwritten letter. What I'm actually engaged in is a white-collar high-wire act without a safety net, where each typo means I have to start over with fresh stationery. If I were allowed to use the state-of-the-art computer that's been staring at me all day in sleep mode, I'd have finished ten minutes ago. Instead, I'm hammering away on the manual typewriter, olive green and Smith Corona, circa the nineteen-fifties, which also happens to be when the art on the walls is from. In other words, the obsolete past.

"Dear _____:" the letter begins. "I believe I have something in which you might be interested . . ."

The owner prefers a colon in the salutation; he prefers the day of the month spelled out, "twenty-eighth"; he prefers a carbon copy filed alphabetically in the bottom drawer, the original "cc" in blue ink. He describes the painting's provenance, its importance to modern art, its five-figure price, which he wants spelled out. He's hovering by my desk as I type, dressed in his three-piece suit and denim smock, the embodiment of where art meets commerce, although as far as I can tell it's been more art than commerce of late. If he's noticed that I'm on my third piece of letterhead, he seems not to care. He's a good guy; he hired me, after all. "I like your background," he'd told me during my job interview. He was referring to my two years at the Denver Art Museum, never mind that I was in food service. What he really liked, speaking of nepotism, was that I came recommended by the father of a friend of a friend. I'm four removed from power, meaning that I've been given an entry-level position as a receptionist without having done much to earn it. As for the owner, he's been

in this business thirty years, starting with nothing except an innate ability to "see art," and he's worked his way up to where he is today.

"'Seeing' is not the same as 'looking,'" he'd said. I pretended I understood the distinction.

When I'm done typing the letter it's six-thirty, but time doesn't matter to the owner. He reads the final copy twice, handling the paper carefully, admiring his turns of phrase, and then he does what he always does, measures the top and bottom margins with the ruler he carries in his denim smock. He's used to dealing in tenths of centimetres and percentages of UV. Sometimes my margins are askew, but today they're flawless, and this pleases him, and it seems to be a good time to recommend, gently, that if I were able to type his correspondence with the two-thousand-dollar computer sitting on the front desk in sleep mode we wouldn't ever have to worry about things like imperfect margins again.

"It's done automatically," I tell him, like, *Isn't that neat*.

He shakes his head. "I don't want automatic," he says. Of course he doesn't. He wants debossed type. He wants pigment on the page. He wants art from the past.

Then he signs his name in big looping script, full of hope, sealing it up for the mailman tomorrow at noon.

"Thank you," the owner says to me, and he retreats to his office, while I file the carbon copy in the bottom drawer next to the petty cash and take out fifteen dollars for myself, because I don't get paid for overtime.

It's six-forty-five and it's cloudless and cool. Whatever you've heard about the beauty of Aspen is true: snow-capped mountains with golden light, etc. Every person I pass has the same healthy sheen that comes from having twenty-four-hour access to fresh air, pure water, unlimited optimism. No one knows me, but they all smile anyway. In Denver, the streets were more crowded and the people smiled less. "You're going to love it in Aspen," one of the museum guards told me, on my last day at the café. He was fifty removed from power. He'd never been

out of Denver, so what he said was theory. “I know I will,” I said, but I’d never been out of Denver, either.

Now I’m strolling through town trying to love it, trying to shake off the last nine-plus hours inside the art gallery, less one hour for lunch. I’ve been staring at Abstract Expressionism for so long that when I close my eyes I don’t see an afterimage of the snowcapped mountains with golden light, I see how the artists would have depicted those snowcapped mountains: white, yellow, angle, triangle, yellow, white. Then they’d title it “Mountain,” hang it on the wall, and let the viewer ponder. Not mountain but un-mountain. Not mountain but *essence* of mountain. Suddenly I’m seeing everything through the prism of the Abstract Expressionist’s paintbrush—the stores, the streets, the signs, each object disassembled to its component parts of color and form, even the smiling faces of the strangers who pass by me, white, white, white, and underneath it all is the soundtrack of the continuous clacking of the typewriter keys. This is what I mean when I say that I’m beginning to wonder if working in an art gallery is taking some sort of toll on my psyche.

On the corner of the next street, between a locally owned bakery and a family-owned florist, is an independently owned bookstore, big bay window filled with books, sandwich-board sign on the sidewalk that eschews the tongue-in-cheek message for the no-nonsense “OPEN,” which I read as *o, p, e, n*. I’ve passed this bookstore before, and I’ve often thought of going in. There’s a young woman about my age exiting the store; she’s wearing a skirt and heels, presumably for her office job, and carrying under her arm a bagful of books, cash-flow concerns not a problem. In the doorway we have one of those socially awkward interchanges where we’re trying to sidestep each other, left, right, left, right. Her face is sunburned from days of cloudless skies. Or maybe she’s just embarrassed. She stops and stares at me, and for some reason the gallery owner’s maxim comes back to me full force,

“Seeing is not the same as looking.”

No one is inside the store except the cashier, standing behind the counter, subsumed by silence, sunset light streaming through the big bay window. He’s probably been gazing into the middle distance of book spines since nine o’clock this morning. “Hello,” he says to me. *H, e, l, l, o*. I have the fleeting thought that I should do for him what the mailman did for me, make small talk, after which the cashier will offer a personal tour of his store.

But the store is tiny, it’s musty, it’s the opposite of Barnes & Noble. No tour needed. Here are the history books, the political books, the tell-alls. Here is

Stephen King, six shelves of sixty-some volumes, “The Dark Half,” “The Dead Zone,” to name two. The titles tell you everything you need to know about what you’re going to find inside—somebody in jeopardy—and so do the covers, with their giant type, bold colors, silhouetted figures. Stephen King isn’t writing with only metaphor or misdirection in mind, or art and society. Yes, this is the antidote to the past nine hours, a good book, a fun book, a page-turner, something with straightforward prose, crystal-clear storytelling, something that goes down easy. But which of these volumes should I choose? The covers might be similar but the subjects are wide-ranging: cats, dogs, clowns, authors, the list goes on. Here’s one about a little boy who is paralyzed and attacked by a werewolf, and another about a little boy who is killed and comes back from the dead, and here’s yet another, the most famous of all, about a little boy with special powers living in an empty hotel being pursued by a deranged man wielding a mallet.

As I go from book to book, gauging and appraising, I get the sense that I’m being watched by the cashier, behind the counter ten feet away, suspicious, displeased, small-town smile gone, patience gone, too, about to call out to me, No more browsing! Let’s make a selection! But no one talks like this in Aspen, of course. In Aspen, you can stay as long as you like, friend,

browse as long as you like. You can thumb through all six shelves until your mind has become so saturated with themes of violence and horror and degradation that you’re no longer even in the right section but have unwittingly drifted into self-help, which, oddly, has been placed next to Stephen King. These covers are different, with thin type, light colors, and stock photos, and they have prosaic titles like “A Practical Guide” or “A Workbook.” I am far from art now. I’m even farther from metaphor and misdirection. But Stephen King’s theme remains: somebody is in jeopardy. Depression, drug addiction, domestic violence. Who will cope? Who will recover? Who will be dead by the end? Come to think of it, it makes perfect sense to have placed self-help here, horrors side by side. Death, disease, dementia. I’m not even sure what I’m looking for anymore. Still, I gauge and appraise, plucking one more book at random with a title that I’m able to render only by its component parts: *boys. abused. sexually*.

The big bay window is behind me, but I can tell that the sun has set on the snowcapped mountains, and I can hear the cashier getting ready to go home. The book in my hand resembles all the other books, plain font on white cover, but the stock photo of a figure alone in a room, casting an impossibly long shadow, is vintage Stephen King. The author is a Dr. So-and-So, Ph.D., and he hasn’t written “a practical guide” or “a workbook” but, rather, “an investigation into the long-lasting impact,” his words. He writes, at least in the preface, with an authority that I find tactless. He presumes to know his reader. He claims that he has the statistics to prove it. “Twenty-five years of clinical research,” he says. His assessment is unflinching: symptoms, everything; prognosis, grim. If there’s any optimism in this book, the citizens of Aspen will have to slog through three hundred pages to find it.

Basically, what the doctor is suggesting is that you shouldn’t be wasting your time with make-believe stories about a boy being pursued through an empty hotel by a man wielding a mallet—speaking of metaphor. What you really need to be doing is “coming



to terms,” and you need to be doing it now. You have to start figuring out how the obsolete past is interfering with the inescapable present, ten, fifteen, twenty years later, particularly how it’s interfering with your attempts at love and happiness. But the main impediment, as far as the doctor is concerned, is that you, the reader, don’t know how to figure any of this out, and another impediment is that you don’t know if you even want to.

This is when the cashier calls out, “Closing time,” in a voice so mellifluous, so Aspen apologetic, and for a moment I’m able to glimpse an Abstract Expressionist view of myself, where I’ve been reduced to my own component parts, standing bleary-eyed in a bookstore, a long way from home, fifteen dollars of ill-gotten gains crumpled in my pocket.

Beneath it all, I can hear the clacking of the typewriter as Stephen King pounds out another best-seller.

The next day is cloudless and cool, and all the streets by the gondola have been closed because Shaun White is in town. He’s just won some major snowboarding championship, and now he’s come to Aspen with his flowing red hair to shoot a Pepsi commercial or a video game or “a show for Netflix,” someone in the crowd is saying. Anyone’s guess is as good as anyone’s. There are trucks and cables and cones, and a production assistant is standing in the intersection, arms folded, telling us we have to wait to cross the street. He likes telling us this. When the light turns green we still can’t go, and then it turns green again, and if it turns green one more time I’m going to be late getting back to the art gallery from lunch. Someone’s asking the production assistant if Shaun White is on the gondola now, but the production assistant has no idea. “I just do what they tell me,” he says. He’s a hundred degrees removed from Shaun White.

There’s a little girl sitting on top of her mother’s shoulders, pointing up at the mountain, a forty-degree slope of green topped with white, saying, “I can see Shaun White, Mommy!” No, she can’t. She’s craning her neck, shielding her eyes against the unchanging Aspen sky. She wants to get up

the mountain. She wants to meet Shaun White. “Can I, Mommy?” She reminds me of myself at her age and my own unrestrained excitement, specifically regarding a certain Denver skyscraper, where my mother worked as a secretary. She’d started at a law firm on the twenty-eighth floor, and then moved to the thirty-third floor, and finally to the forty-first floor, and each time she’d moved it had seemed to me that she was rising higher, both literally and figuratively.

“No,” she’d tell me, “I’m only rising literally.”

She’d brought me to her office once, as part of “Take Your Daughter to Work Day.” I was a boy, but the pedagogical benefits were still applicable. This was when I was six years old, or maybe seven. We rode an elevator that went as fast as a train, skipping the first thirtysomething floors, and when the doors opened I could see the entirety of Denver. There was Mile High Stadium, there was Coors Field, there were ten thousand people crawling on the side-

walk. I spent some of the day helping my mother open mail, but mostly I sat in a swivel chair beside her, swinging my legs and watching her type. I was mesmerized by her fingers. She could have been playing a piano sonata at the concert hall, which could also be seen from the window. When it was time for us to go home, her boss came out to meet me, a big man in a pin-striped suit, shaking my hand and asking the standard question: What is it you want to be when you grow up, “now that you’ve seen the inner workings of a law firm.”

“I want to be a secretary,” I’d told him.

By the fourth green light, there’s a woman in the crowd saying to the production assistant, “This is bullshit.” It’s the same woman from the bookstore the day before, the one with the sunburned face, whose way I couldn’t get out of—in a town of seven thousand people, this isn’t all that coincidental. It’s not clear to me if she’s suggesting that having to wait to cross the



“I’m beginning to think I only really like the Instagram part of owning a farm.”

street is bullshit or if having to wait to cross the street *because of Shaun White* is bullshit. Either way, it's not the kind of talk you often hear in Aspen.

"I just do what they tell me," the production assistant says again, which apparently is his go-to for all interactions with the masses.

But the woman is not persuaded. "That's no excuse," she says.

"He's just doing his job, honey," one of the bystanders says, as if this will resolve the matter, and another tourist is saying that he can see Shaun White coming down the mountain on his snowboard, look, look, look, and everyone is pushing and pulling to look, and I'm pushing the other way, through the crowd, which has doubled in size. I know I'm going to be late, and the owner will be having to cover for me at the front desk, sitting next to the typewriter, gazing into his gallery of unsold art. "Are you a prompt person?" he'd asked at my job interview. "Yes, I am!" I'd said with conviction. I was doing my best to differentiate myself from the twenty other applicants, which is tough when fielding only yes-or-no questions. In the end, it was nepotism that put me over the edge.

The next morning I'm at work, an hour already gone by, when the doctor's preface pops into my empty head. I can see the word "preface" in all caps, sans serif, the sentences marching across my line of vision, across the paintings, shades and shapes without rhyme or reason, as if the artists had given up. Now, as I stare into the vastness of the art gallery, as large and pristine as a high-end hotel lobby without furniture, an unformed idea emerges on the horizon of my consciousness. The abstraction of the gallery dovetails with the abstraction of my memory: blotchy, indistinct, non-narrative, yes, childlike. I don't remember the specifics of that summer afternoon in Denver when my mother left me with a neighbor to go to work. No name, no face, no address. In other words, nothing actionable. I was four or five, maybe I was six, maybe it wasn't summer, maybe it wasn't work she'd gone to. I assume the doctor would say that the memory has intentionally been buried.

IN THE DREAM IN WHICH I AM A WIDOW

I have carried a portion of your ashes overseas to the Spanish statue of the falling angel, its snake of stone wrapped twice around one leg's ankle and coiled around the thigh of the other, stone jaw unhinged and reaching for the humanesque hand. We lived, remember? briefly, near it. One wing arcs up in the sky, erecting an honest steeple, one that points not straight but upward and curving. As faith goes. Back to earth. I've scattered part of what you were from the mouth of my black jacket sleeve onto the field across, watched over by tall and leaning trees, the field from which you returned to me so many nights cold as ice and glowing, your socks full of grass. I heard the door open, blessed the opening, blessed the stench you brought inside our home, blood tangled in the hair on your shin, bits of another man's flesh in your cleats. I was curious about this forbidden felt language. I rubbed my thumbs into your muscles, the salt of you softening as it entered me. You were a wonder with your bones and skin on. You focussed your violence with a pipette's precision, and it never spilled in my direction, never though I lapped at its opening determined to get a taste from the source. Years before we went north, before your bed was my bed, there was a garden in the south we snuck to where spring made us a headboard out of heady jessamine, the poisonous vine's scent sweet, aneurysmal sweet, swelling our brains against our skulls. I remember, even in that giddy upward state, I always knew truth was somewhere not in that sweetness. Now I've made of you a figure always falling. What sort of monster does this make me?

—Gabrielle Bates

This is when the I.T. guy walks into the art gallery unannounced, lugging his tool kit and his industrial-grade laptop. He's been hired to come every couple of months to service the computer we never use.

"How's it running?" he wants to know. He's speaking too loudly for what's acceptable, but no one else is here.

"It's running fine," I say.

He seems disappointed. He takes a seat at my desk, peering into the monitor, waking up the computer from deep sleep, clicking around, checking this and that. He's meticulous about his work, and I respect this. He's also oblivious to the presence of the type-

writer, one foot from his elbow. If he were to lean a little more to the side, he'd hit the carriage return and make it ding. I don't have the heart to tell him that this is our technology of choice.

"I can't find anything wrong," he tells me, but he's going to need to reinstall the operating system anyway. "Just to be safe," he says. I know he's trying to pad his time sheet. I respect this, too.

I make a show of checking my watch, considering, mulling, as if I have things to do. I have eight hours to go.

While we wait for the operating system to reinstall, the I.T. guy leans back

in the chair, hands behind his head, and says, surprisingly, "I like that painting." He's pointing at a silver painting, all lines and inscrutable marks.

"What do you like about it?" I ask him.

"It's pretty," he says. "It's nice." He doesn't know what else to say. "It would look good above my couch." We laugh. He shrugs. He's not concerned with context and history or metaphor and misdirection.

"I've been getting into Baroque lately," he says. He's showing off now.

"So have I," I tell him. I'm lying. I'm happy to draw this conversation out as long as possible.

"What do you like about Baroque?" I ask.

"I like his use of color," he says.

"His?"

"Yes."

I wonder if he means Georges Braque. Or if he couldn't care less about art and is just trying to ingratiate himself to me, the big man at the front desk who signs his time sheet. For all I know, he tells the bookstore person that he likes books, and the florist that he likes flowers. I'm just the receptionist, I want to say to him.

He looks around the gallery, elbows on the desk. "Do you have any Baroque?"

"No, we don't."

"You should get some."

"I'll be sure to tell the owner."

And the next thing I know, I'm giving the I.T. guy a tour of the gallery, a brief introduction to thirty-four works of Abstract Expressionism while the operating-system installation finishes. We go from painting to painting, stopping so I can speak like an expert in the field, point out the details up close, explain the background of the painter, the significance of the brushstroke, the things that you have to know are there, the things that you would never be able to see just by looking.

When we arrive at the silver painting that he likes, he squints hard, an inch from the canvas, as if he's about to discover something, something figurative maybe, the way we do when we lay on our backs beneath a passing cloud.

"What is it that you're seeing?" I ask him.

He leans back. He leans close. "I'm not seeing anything," he says.

"Me, neither," I say.

The owner needs me to stay in the art gallery all day the next day, from nine to six, no outdoor Aspen break, so that I can type up the letter about "Untitled X" to sixty different collectors.

"Lunch is on me," he says, which is fair.

"Dear _____:" each letter begins. "I believe I have something in which you might be interested . . ."

It's the same letter as before: provenance, importance, five-figure price. If I were allowed to use the computer I would be done in an hour.

Today the gallery is filled with the sound of metal on metal, as if I were laboring in a blacksmith's forge, physical exertion necessary for the fabrication of each letter, space, and punctuation mark, including ":". Nothing comes easy in clerical work. If the art gallery wasn't air-conditioned, I'd be wiping my brow. The only pause in the pounding comes when the carriage bell dings to indicate that the edge of the page is drawing near. This is where the margins can become problematic.

Maybe it wasn't nepotism that got me hired over those twenty other applicants, most of whom came equipped with art-history degrees. Maybe it was my ability to type seventy words a minute. This, thanks to my mother, but also thanks to my sixth-grade typing teacher, who was earnest and exacting, who would spend five minutes before each class expounding to a room of mostly uninterested eleven-year-olds on how we were developing a skill that would serve us in the real world. Hers was a practical approach to education. "Never mind literature," she'd tell us. "Never mind history." She didn't need to convince me of the efficacy of typing. I'd been made a believer on the forty-first floor overlooking the streets of Denver. I was getting B's in those other subjects, anyway.

Standing in front of the classroom, she would call out the keys of the home row, that row of gibberish which made all communication possible. "A, S, D, F,

J, K, L, semicolon!" She was a small woman, but her voice boomed over the din of twenty-five decade-old Dell computers tapping out an uneven rhythm. Again and again, we students marched back and forth across the keyboard, a room full of sixth graders being drilled for a vocational army.

"A, S, D, F, J, K, L, semicolon!"

"If you can master this," the teacher would shout, "you can master anything!"

She knew what she was talking about. One month into the semester, we'd advanced to a complete sentence, "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country!" she would scream, and as she screamed so would we type. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country!"

We were never supposed to look at our fingers on the keys, we were never supposed to look at the computer monitors, we were supposed to rely purely on muscle memory.

"A body never forgets," she promised us.

It's past noon when I finally take a break, my fingertips throbbing, and order my free lunch from the organic restaurant down the street. I over-order: sandwich, soup, side, soda, side. I might as well. They tell me it'll be here in ten minutes. They sound as though they're all smiles. Fifteen minutes later

it hasn't arrived. Twenty minutes later I'm starving and I'm not going to tip. This is when the door to the gallery swings open, but instead of the delivery guy walking in it's the woman from the other day, the one at the gondola who told the production assistant it was bullshit. She stands at my desk, arms crossed, face sun-

burned, and she says to me, using a voice appropriate for a high-end art gallery with a library-like atmosphere, almost a whisper, "I'm interested in buying 'Untitled X.'"

It turns out that her name is Mimi and she's the gallery owner's daughter. Even in a town of seven thousand, this is coincidental. She also happens to work at a big-time art gallery on the other side of Aspen. "Art runs in the



family," she tells me. She puts "art" in air quotes. She's not the receptionist, she's the director. She's one removed from power. "Nepotism," she says. She's jaded. Her father once mentioned her art gallery, but that was only to say "We're interested in different things," which I took to mean that the other gallery made money.

The first time Mimi takes me there is after hours, for what may or may not be a first date. When she flicks on the overhead lights I'm surrounded by the exceedingly pleasant view of realism, pastoralism, Aspenism. Here are paintings, heavy on the impasto, that are intended to calm the soul, soothe the mind, that would look good hanging above the I.T. guy's couch. Snow-covered cottages, moonlit villages, lingering dusks, scenes that don't need interpretation or context to make themselves understood. These paintings aren't speaking to the postwar upheaval of the twentieth century, by way of a newly invented visual language. In fact, they're not speaking to anything at all. This is the art of the here and now, made a year ago, art that goes for three figures, sometimes four, never five. The gallery does a brisk business at the low end.

Mimi doesn't have to ask me, What is it that you're seeing? I can see what it is I'm seeing: a sailboat on a lake at twilight, ripples in the water, moon in the sky. Title: "Sailboat on a Lake at Twilight."

"Beautiful," I say.

But Mimi gives a wide sweep of her hand, encompassing all the art work. "I think it's bullshit," she says.

I take a tour of the front desk, swivelling in the receptionist's chair, opening and closing the drawers, wondering what it would be like to sit here five days a week, nine hours a day, less one hour for lunch.

"Where's the typewriter?" I ask Mimi, which is a joke. We have a good laugh. We have a glass of wine. "Have as much as you want," she says. There's a whole case in the back office, white wine, recent year, left over from the last opening, attended, incidentally, by the living local artist and three hundred people.

Mimi tells me that the receptionist is responsible for bartending. "It's in the job description," she says. We have a good laugh about this, too. I imagine

eighty bottles of white wine being popped and poured. "If they get drunk, they buy more," she tells me.

The only living artist who ever visited my gallery was an elderly woman, walking with a caretaker and a cane, whom the owner spoke to in reverential tones. She'd flown from New York to Aspen, two-hour layover in Denver, to spend the afternoon looking at her paintings on the walls. She seemed to like what the owner had done with her work, how it was hung and lit and framed with just the right percentage of UV. She'd stood in front of each piece for several minutes, about to say something but saying nothing. Finally, she asked if anything had sold. "Not yet," the owner had said. He'd sounded hopeful, as if things were bound to change. After she was gone, the owner told me, "She knew Jackson Pollock personally."

The wine is going to my head, and the swivel chair seems to be swivelling on its own. The gallery is peaceful, innocent, tranquil. Pastoralism come to life.

"Dreamy," Mimi says.

"Yes," I coo.

But she's talking about her father and his art. "He lives in the past," she says.

"Don't we all?" I say.

"I don't," she says. According to Mimi, her father has been trying to unload everything for years, including "Untitled X." "Don't get your hopes up," she tells me.

"I won't," I say.

She thinks her father will eventually go out of business, liquidate the art, bring a merciful end to his Abstract Expressionism in Aspen.

"It's tragic," she says.

"Yes," I say, but what I'm imagining is being unemployed in Aspen, walking the streets, trying to find work, maybe running the gondola.

Mimi tells me that her first love was the Denver Art Museum. Her first love was my day job. Her father would take her there when she was a little girl, driving three hours each way for every new exhibit, slowing down to ten miles an hour at the Continental Divide, so that his daughter could experience the precise moment of before and after in America. She tells me how she would wander through the galleries of the museum, looking at the art alone, understanding it intuitively, immediately, with-

out instruction or guidance. "Art runs in the family," she says. Here she does not use air quotes.

"What was it like working in the café?" she wants to know.

"I stole things," I tell her. I tell her how I would take bags of potato chips printed with van Gogh's face and then sell them to the museum guards at half price. I tell it like it's a funny story, but when I'm done she says, "That's sad."

"I thought it was clever," I say.

"We should go there sometime," she says. I'm not sure if she's asking me out on a second date.

She tells me that when she first discovered one of Monet's water-lily paintings, second floor of the museum, she sat in front of it for half an hour. "I was six years old," she says. "Maybe I was seven." She remembers with clarity having been transfixed by the great artist's brushwork, the colors, the perspective. Without knowing anything about him, she'd somehow understood that it had been painted by a man with failing eyesight.

"But how could you have known that?" I ask.

She pours me more wine. She pours herself more wine. She turns on the computer and the screen lights up. "Show me how you type," she says.

"I'm driving drunk," I say.

This she finds funny. She's standing close to me. Her hip by my shoulder.

"What should I type?" I ask, but suddenly my fingers are moving on their own over the space-age keyboard, seventy words a minute, as if I'm skating on ice, no missteps, no typos, all muscle memory. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country!"

Then Mimi's sitting on my lap, making the first move, making the swivel chair swivel, and when she kisses me her hair falls in my face, and I can smell the white wine on her breath. The gallery is subsumed by that silence with which I've grown so familiar, and when she comes up for air she's staring into my eyes, staring hard, a few inches from my face, as if she's just noticed something, astute observer that she is.

"What is it that you're seeing?" I ask. ♦

THE CRITICS



ON TELEVISION

ALREADY FAMOUS

“Halston,” on Netflix.

BY NAOMI FRY

The penultimate episode of “Halston,” a five-part bio-pic series on Netflix, opens not with a bang but with a snort. It’s the late seventies, and Roy Halston Frowick is the most famous fashion designer in the United States, creating luxurious, clean-lined dresses, and hawk-ing everything from perfume to luggage to carpeting. In a snappily edited mon-

tage, Halston arrives at Studio 54 with an entourage—including Liza Minnelli (Krysta Rodriguez) and the Italian jeweller Elsa Peretti (Rebecca Dayan)—to a cheering crowd of wannabes and paparazzi; he hosts an orgy in his Upper East Side town house; he holds a fashion show in a skyscraper overlooking midtown; he impulse-buys a beachside com-

pound in Montauk. All of this is scored not just to a driving disco beat but to the repetitive whoosh of cocaine vanishing up Halston’s nostrils quicker than the drug can be laid out in lines. What a rush! But how long can he keep it up?

Not for long. The series, which is based on Steven Gaines’s 1991 biography of the designer, charts Halston’s dizzying

Ryan Murphy’s new series is more interested in the clothes than it is in the man who designed them.

rise—from a sad farm boy growing up gay in the Midwest to a Bergdorf Goodman milliner to an internationally beloved couturier—and eventual fall. After licensing his name to J. C. Penney, in 1982, Halston lost control of his business and receded from the spotlight. In 1990, he died of AIDS. The show does not dwell on Halston's physical decline, however; it is much more interested in the designer during his most productive if self-destructive period.

The series was created by another gay Midwesterner, Ryan Murphy, one of the most prolific forces in television. Like Halston, Murphy grew up in Indiana, and his name has become synonymous with the domination of an industry. In the past couple of decades, his shows have included the Fox musical series "Glee," the FX anthology programs "American Horror Story" and "American Crime Story," the drag-ball drama "Pose" (also on FX), and, after he signed an estimated three-hundred-million-dollar contract with Netflix, in 2018, period shows like "Ratched" and "Hollywood." The projects have varied in quality, but Murphy has maintained, across multiple networks, a unified artistic vision that is wholly his. Ending up like Halston is surely his worst nightmare.

Murphy's word for the overarching tone of his shows is "baroque," and, by that standard, "Halston" is the Platonic ideal of a Ryan Murphy show. The series is propulsive and vivid and over the top, with quick shifts between melodrama and farce. When it is revealed, in Episode 4, that "some crazy girl from Mamaroneck" died in an air vent while attempting to sneak into Studio 54, the worst part of the whole thing, Halston's crew decides, is that the victim was wearing an outfit designed not by him but by his rival Calvin Klein.

Ewan McGregor, who portrays Halston, tears into this kind of self-absorbed cattiness with relish. "Fuck Jackie Kennedy," he hisses in his deserted hat salon, early in the first episode. (Halston designed her Inauguration pillbox.) "She killed me—stopped wearing hats." The acting can be a tad excessive, but this, too, is often the mark of a Murphy production, where characters who are famous in real life are portrayed by well-known actors who pour it on thick—one celebrity reproducing the tics of another. A

big draw of "The People v. O. J. Simpson" was to see John Travolta "doing" the attorney Robert Shapiro. If you're seeking a more subdued portrait of the designer, then check out Frédéric Tcheng's documentary, "Halston," from 2019, which captures quieter elements of the man, such as his loving relationship with his niece. If you're looking for a good time, then turn on Murphy's show to watch McGregor "do" Halston in a black turtleneck, slicked-back hair, and sunglasses, a cigarette cocked between his fingers as he lounges in his sunken Paul Rudolph-designed living room, a bitchy "fuck you" ready on the tip of his tongue.

Surface pleasures have plenty of appeal—there's nothing wrong with watching good-looking people in beautiful clothes overact at each other while they drink and do drugs in gorgeous rooms—and, certainly, focussing on the shape and the look of things, rather than mining their depth, makes a lot of sense for a bio-pic about Halston, a man who seems to have lived for the superficial. Murphy's team has made painstaking efforts to reproduce the world that the designer inhabited. In Halston's Montauk home, the books in the bookcase were turned spines-in, presumably to achieve a more pleasingly monochromatic look, which is also how the bookcase is depicted in the show. But even Halston's designs, known for their flowing minimalism—sometimes they were made with just a single seam—only appeared simple. In Tcheng's documentary, a fashion curator notes that the pattern for one seemingly straightforward dress is in fact as intricate as "a Cuisinart blade." Likewise, Halston's psychology and his relationships must have been complex things, or at least more complex than the show would lead us to believe.

The series suggests, through a handful of Depression-era flashbacks (reminiscent, to me, of the Don Draper-as-Dick Whitman moments of "Mad Men," always the weakest, most formulaic parts of that great show), that Halston's original wound stems from his mother's rough treatment at the hands of his father—a violence that seems at least partly connected to her acceptance of her son's sexuality. "You are far too special for this place," mother tells child, a fresh bruise on her cheek, as she admires a hat that he's decorated for her with feath-

ers plucked from the family's chicken coop. Many of the lines have a tell-rather-than-show quality to them: one of Halston's lovers says, "Men like us, we come here from some faraway place to invent ourselves, make something out of nothing." Later, Halston refers to his circle of friends as a "bunch of queers and freaks and girls who haven't grown up yet." This, incidentally, is nearly all that we find out about the secondary characters, which is a shame. Dayan, as Peretti, Halston's muse, has a nimble elegance, and David Pittu, as the illustrator Joe Eula, his right-hand man, adds some warmth to a clique that could make your blood run cold; mostly, though, they serve as buffers for McGregor's exaggerated hauteur.

As I watched, I kept thinking back to "The Assassination of Gianni Versace"—the second installment of Murphy's "American Crime Story" franchise—which told the tale of another of the twentieth century's most important designers. What made that show interestingly complex, though, was not the depiction of Versace (here, too, we got flashbacks of mother counselling son, this time back in Calabria: "Success only comes with hard work . . . that's why it's special") but that of his killer, Andrew Cunanan. Aside from being a murderer, Cunanan, an appearances-obsessed striver, was not unlike Halston, though the show portrayed him as much more particular in his oddity and desperation: his contentious, tortured, and often violent relationships with his parents, his friends, and his lovers felt textured and unpredictable, in a way that made for both good and compelling TV. In the new series, Murphy keeps such a tight rein on the designer's world that Halston is unable to breathe as a subject. He never becomes truly strange or surprising.

Sick with AIDS, stripped of his business, Halston spends his final days being driven up and down the West Coast by his manservant. In the show's last episode, the designer sits by the Pacific Ocean, wearing a white wool cardigan layered over a white turtleneck sweater, a cane in his hand. "Years ago, I'd look out there, and I'd look at the blue, and I would think, What can I do with that blue?" he recalls. "My mind would start racing, thinking about the collection I could do. . . . But now I only think about what a pretty blue it is." Pretty is a lot, but it isn't enough. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

GUNS AND BUTTER

Have fights over rights led us astray?

BY KELEFA SANNEH



You came through for me, and I am going to come through for you,” Donald Trump said. It was 2017, and he was in Atlanta, speaking at a meeting of the National Rifle Association—the first time in more than thirty years that a sitting President had addressed the group. Unlike his recent predecessors, Trump did not claim to enjoy shooting skeet (Barack Obama), or doves (George W. Bush), or ducks (Bill Clinton), or quail (George H. W. Bush). His connection to the group was purely political. “We want to assure you of the sacred right of self-defense for all of our citizens,” he told the members. “As your President, I

will never, ever infringe on the right of the people to keep and bear arms—never, ever.”

The N.R.A. had spent decades teaching politicians to talk like this. The organization was founded, in 1871, as a kind of non-governmental training agency, but it transformed first into a hobbyist club and then into a political-advocacy group until, by the early twenty-first century, it was more or less indistinguishable from the conservative movement and the Republican Party. In a partisan country, “the sacred right of self-defense” became yet another partisan issue, and political scientists have spent years trying to fig-

ure out whether the power of the N.R.A. has been more a cause or an effect of this evolution. Four years after Trump’s address, both the organization and the former President are much diminished, at least for the moment. While Trump regroups in Florida, the New York attorney general is suing to dissolve the N.R.A. for a series of financial scandals that seem to involve kickbacks, phantom jobs, and the misuse of private airplanes, and that together create the impression of an organization scrambling to deal with a problem that its founders surely did not foresee: having more money than it could responsibly spend.

The N.R.A. thrived, until recently, by harnessing the power of political abstraction. For decades, the group found ways to portray its project as a defense of liberty, shifting its focus from guns to gun rights, and from gun rights to rights more generally. Gallup polls suggest that the number of Americans living in gun-owning households has trended down slightly, from fifty per cent in 1968 to forty-two per cent last year. But, for an organization that seeks mainly to energize one of the two major political parties, minority status is not necessarily a problem. In a new book, “Firepower” (Princeton), the political scientist Matthew Lacombe shows how the N.R.A. succeeded by embracing its subcultural identity, teaching its people to think of themselves as a “persecuted minority under attack.” In 1989, the group sent members a dire warning, saying that anyone who owned a semi-automatic firearm—“30 million law-abiding Americans,” the N.R.A. estimated—had reason to fear proposed legislation. “You must act now,” the organization declared, “before you become a criminal.”

Lacombe’s book is primarily descriptive, not prescriptive, although he does not conceal his disapproval of the N.R.A. agenda. He notes that the organization has blocked countless gun regulations that score well in opinion polls, and he worries that this kind of activity “subverts the will of the majority.” Most people agree, however, that the “will of the majority” sometimes deserves to be subverted, even if we disagree about when. In 1994, the

In modern times, the N.R.A. has reframed its mission as a defense of liberty.

law professor Lani Guinier published “The Tyranny of the Majority,” a sharp collection of essays arguing that certain minorities, especially racial minorities, had the right not just to vote but to meaningfully share in political power, rather than submit to “majority rule.” (The book was published after Guinier lost a high-profile political battle: President Clinton nominated her as the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, and then withdrew the nomination in the face of controversy; critics said that Guinier espoused reforms that amounted to a “racial spoils system” for Black politicians.) Guinier and the leaders of the N.R.A. had little in common, but they shared a belief in the importance of minority rights. Especially since the sixties, advocates of all sorts have learned to present their causes as demands for the recognition of their civil rights. “As long as *your* rights to freedom are denied, *ours* are not secure,” Rupert Richardson, the president of the N.A.A.C.P., said in 1993, when she addressed a landmark rally for gay rights. Using similar language, a Christian activist group told the *Times* that the rally was a threat to “the silent majority of Americans whose individual rights are at stake.”

Jamal Greene, a legal scholar at Columbia, thinks that all this talk about rights has gone too far. In a provocative new book, “How Rights Went Wrong: Why Our Obsession with Rights Is Tearing America Apart” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), he pushes back against what he calls “rightsism,” which in his view makes judges too powerful, and makes it harder for the rest of us to find reasonable solutions to our political problems. When he mocks our tendency to “kiss the hems of the robes of judges,” Greene echoes the view of conservatives like the late Justice Antonin Scalia. “It’s not up to the courts to invent new minorities that get special protections,” Scalia said, in a 2013 speech. The remarks were widely interpreted as a message to his colleagues, who were growing more receptive to the idea that gay people had a constitutional right to marry their partners. But Greene is no

conservative; his book is driven by liberal-minded concern about racism and inequality, and is aimed at readers who share this perspective. (Greene happens to be the brother of a prominent social commentator: the rapper Talib Kweli, who once rhymed, “The cops flashing the lights, or passing on bikes/ Ask for your rights and they beat you like ‘The Passion of Christ.’”) To Greene, the story of the N.R.A. is just one more example of how seductive—and how destructive—the language of rights can be.

Like many of our sacred texts, the Bill of Rights, ten amendments added to the Constitution in 1791, is a familiar document that comes to us from a deeply unfamiliar world. Greene writes that the First Amendment—which forbids Congress to prohibit the “free exercise” of religion, or to curtail “the freedom of speech,” and which today constrains the regulation of everything from political campaigning to pharmaceutical advertising—was originally meant to shield not individuals but “local political institutions” like churches from federal interference. Arguments about the Second Amendment, which guarantees “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms,” often center on the significance of its opening phrases, which stipulate the importance of maintaining a “well regulated militia.” One purpose of such a militia, in post-Revolutionary America, was to put down rebellions of enslaved people, who in some states constituted a large portion of the population; in 1998, the legal historian Carl Bogus published an influential essay suggesting that this was the hidden purpose of

the Second Amendment. “If there should happen an insurrection of slaves,” Patrick Henry declared, during a debate over ratification, in 1788, the states “ought to have power to call forth the efforts of the militia, when necessary.”

The N.R.A. does not quite date back to the militia era. It was founded just after the Civil War, in New York, and its mission evolved in synch with its complicated relationship to the gov-

ernment. Especially in its early years, the N.R.A. provided marksmanship training, partly to make sure that citizens would be able to help the military defend America. Lacombe refers to the organization’s approach during those decades as “quasi-governmental,” although the government did not always see it that way. Starting in the nineteen-thirties, the N.R.A. turned its attention to fighting proposed laws that would limit the sale or use of guns. Lacombe analyzes the language used in the group’s magazine, *American Rifleman*, which cast gun owners as patriots crucial to the project of defending America. The N.R.A. opposed mandatory gun registration, insisting that it could be a first step toward confiscation; in an editorial from 1940, the group suggested that British gun regulations had left that country “disarmed and gun-ignorant,” and therefore vulnerable to both criminals and foreign invaders.

One of Lacombe’s most surprising findings is that N.R.A. messages did not always foreground the constitutional right to bear arms. Using a technique called automated topic modelling to track the group’s evolving messages, he found that the Second Amendment became a major focus of the N.R.A. only in the nineteen-seventies. In the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, debates over gun laws were growing more heated, and the group’s reputation more polarizing. As a consequence, the N.R.A. began to deemphasize the theme of “military preparedness.” The group spent less time asking what citizens could do for their government and more time asking what their government might try to do to them. N.R.A. editorials that cited the Second Amendment, Lacombe found, tended to portray guns as a means with which to resist “tyranny from one’s own government.” The group’s opposition to gun restrictions grew closer to total; the right to bear arms was “America’s first freedom,” the one right that prevents the government from taking away all the others.

Rights exist to protect minorities, and so rights groups typically conceive of themselves as minority-rights groups, defending a besieged few from a threatening many. This explains why, paradox-



ically, the N.R.A.'s embrace of Second Amendment arguments led the group to become *less* focussed on guns and more focussed on partisan and cultural concerns. In 2016, the group started a video network, NRATV, which sometimes made headlines with provocations wholly unrelated to firearms; one notorious segment mocked a diversity initiative on "Thomas & Friends," the children's show about talking locomotives, by depicting the trains wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods. (NRATV was shut down in 2019, amid a growing dispute between the N.R.A. and the advertising agency that helped run the network.)

In Trump, the N.R.A. found first a candidate and then a President who shared its cultural preoccupations, even if he didn't always share its staunch opposition to new gun restrictions. After seventeen people were killed at a school shooting in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, Trump announced that he would support a law allowing police officers to disarm anyone deemed dangerous, without an initial court order. "Take the guns first, go through due process second," he said, during a televised meeting. His Administration never pursued that proposal, but later that year it unilaterally banned bump stocks—mechanical accessories that enable semi-automatic guns to fire continuously, like machine guns, which are much more heavily regulated. The N.R.A.'s response to the ban was notably mild: a spokesperson told the Associated Press that the group was "disappointed." A much stronger response arrived earlier this year from an appeals-court judge, who ruled, in an ongoing lawsuit over the ban, that the Trump Administration had overstepped its authority, possibly in a way that could threaten "the people's right to liberty."

The N.R.A.'s legal strategy was evidently well chosen. Today, Americans have freer access to firearms than the citizens of any other country in the world, and the Supreme Court recently accepted a case that may clarify precisely where, and how, we are entitled to "bear arms." The historian Carol Anderson thinks that America's singular relationship with guns reflects its singular history of racism. In "The Sec-



"All those people . . . they're going to fill up on bread . . . and I'm powerless to warn them."

ond: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America" (Bloomsbury), she writes that the Second Amendment was "designed and has consistently been constructed to keep African Americans powerless and vulnerable." Anderson's book is a bracing reminder that the defense of rights is not necessarily a liberatory project. She notes that a 1792 law, meant to encourage the kind of "militia" formation called for by the Second Amendment, required every "free able-bodied white male citizen" to arm himself. In the nineteen-sixties, armed demonstrations by the Black Panthers in California inspired Ronald Reagan, then the governor, to sign the Mulford Act, which made it illegal to carry loaded firearms in public. The N.R.A. supported the law, and, according to a contemporaneous newspaper account quoted by Anderson, an N.R.A. rep-

resentative was satisfied that the law would "not affect the law-abiding citizen, sportsman, hunter, or target shooters." (The unmistakable implication was that no member of the Black Panthers could be described as a "law-abiding citizen.") And Anderson begins her book with the story of Philando Castile, the Black man who was shot to death by police in 2016, during a traffic stop, after telling them that he was carrying a gun, for which he had a permit. The killing set off a wave of protests, but the N.R.A. conspicuously declined to join in. For Anderson, this is a sign that the organization did not truly support gun rights for everyone—that its agenda was merely an extension of the eighteenth-century white-militia movement.

The Mulford Act, though, was not an expansion of gun rights but a restriction of them, and its passage was proof

that such restrictions have sometimes targeted Black citizens. Black people may be particularly burdened, too, by some of the most broadly popular current restrictions, like the laws that bar felons from owning firearms, and laws meant to tamp down urban violence. The sociologist Jennifer Carlson has written about an ongoing “war on guns,” which in many ways resembles the war on drugs, and which is likewise “disproportionately fought in urban America against black and brown boys and men.” Anderson argues that the Second Amendment is “steeped in anti-Blackness,” but it does not follow that every effort to curtail its protections is therefore pro-Black.

Jamal Greene shares Anderson’s suspicion of Second Amendment activism, which seems to him a particularly egregious example of the “rightsism” that he deplores. He quotes Wayne LaPierre, the longtime N.R.A. leader, saying that the group’s “absolutist” view of gun rights reflects the vision of the Founding Fathers, and he offers a one-word response: “rubbish.” Greene notes that, at the time the Constitution was drafted, gun rights, like other rights, were not treated as sacrosanct: a number of states enshrined the right to bear arms in their constitutions while simultaneously enforcing gun restrictions. The Bill of Rights, which was written largely to protect the states

from federal interference, gave rise to countless mutually incompatible rights claims, and courts were often asked to decide how to reconcile them. As Greene shows, courts responded not just by enumerating and sometimes creating new rights but by constructing hierarchies of rights, to help decide which should predominate.

One of our most important rights turns out to be one not mentioned in the Constitution: the right to privacy. In 1965, when the Supreme Court struck down a law banning the sale of contraceptive drugs and devices, Justice William O. Douglas wrote that the government was obliged to respect “the notions of privacy surrounding the marriage relationship.” (The right to buy contraception was later extended to non-married people.) Douglas described the right to privacy as a “penumbral” right, necessary to shield individuals from the harsh glare of “government intrusion”; in a concurrence, Justice Arthur Goldberg wrote that the right to privacy was “a fundamental personal right,” and that the government was therefore forbidden, by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, to deprive anyone of it “without due process of law.” Less than a decade later, the Court cited this right to privacy when it struck down anti-abortion laws nationwide, and a wide range of advocates learned a strategic lesson: to prevail in the Supreme Court,

it was useful to be able to claim that the right you were seeking to defend was “fundamental.”

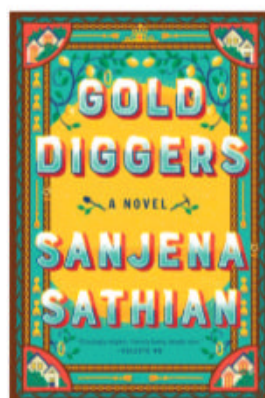
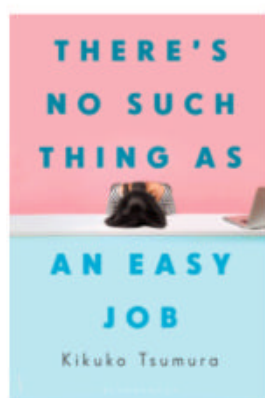
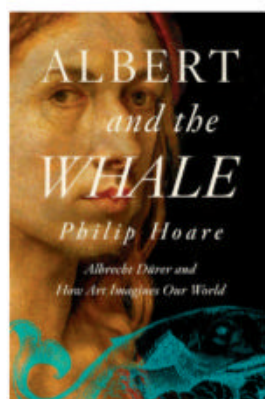
Greene doubts that Supreme Court Justices are in a position to credibly tell us which of our rights are “fundamental.” And he worries that their approach has turned us all into fundamentalists, debating our disagreements in terms that suggest our basic freedom is constantly at stake. He alludes to the case of Masterpiece Cakeshop, the Colorado bakery that refused to create a cake for a same-sex wedding and was ordered by the state to change its policy. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that the baker’s First Amendment right to the free exercise of religion had been violated. In Greene’s view, our obsession with rights encouraged advocates on both sides to view a complicated case as a simple referendum on liberty, pitting gay rights against religious freedom. “A Christian baker who refuses to bake cakes for same-sex weddings is compared, in court, to Jim Crow-era segregationists,” he writes. “The couple who want only to be served on equal terms are likened to a Babylonian king persecuting religious dissidents who refuse to prostrate themselves before him.” He worries that the endless search for “fundamental” rights inevitably makes disputes like this one more intractable.

Most people know that American gun laws are anomalous. But Greene argues that our broader approach to civil rights is also anomalous. In many other countries, he notes, judges are freer to consider context, and to seek compromise. They can weigh the value of free expression, say, against the cost of possible harms—which is the sort of “balancing” test that American jurisprudence generally prohibits. Greene assumes that our various rights are bound to conflict, and he wants courts to settle these questions not by determining which rights are fundamental but by asking smaller, more factual questions: “Is the government motivated by bigotry? Is it responding to evidence?” He calls Masterpiece Cakeshop a “hard case,” and says that, in some instances, courts should be more willing to “negotiate,” thinking less about abstract questions of fundamental rights and more about whether the parties in-



volved are behaving reasonably. He believes that it is often reasonable for colleges, private or public, to punish faculty or students who make “racist or sexist” remarks. In his view, institutions of all sorts should be granted more “leeway” to fight historical discrimination by explicitly favoring Black and Latino applicants. And he reminds readers that, in 1952, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of a man who had distributed an anti-“Negro” pamphlet, in violation of an Illinois law banning the “exhibition” of printed matter that subjected “citizens of any race, color, creed or religion to contempt, derision, or obloquy.” That decision, he notes, would be “inconceivable” in today’s Supreme Court, which consistently holds that the First Amendment protects our right to virtually all political speech, no matter how bigoted. Yet he suspects that, in some cases, our freedom to offend is not worth the price we pay for it.

Rights that are unlimited in scope must be limited in number. Greene argues that courts are reluctant to enumerate new rights, perhaps because any new right, broadly interpreted, could have far-reaching and unpredictable effects, in the way that “the right to privacy” effectively legalized not only contraception but also abortion and, decades later, in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), gay sex. Greene criticizes the Court’s refusal, in 1987, to interfere with a death-penalty sentence on the basis of statistical evidence of racial disparity in such sentences. Justice Lewis Powell wrote that doing so might threaten “the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system.” Greene thinks that this kind of fear helps explain why American courts, unlike a number of their global counterparts, have mostly declined to recognize positive rights, such as “the right to food or shelter or health care.” He thinks that it also may explain why courts are often unwilling to tackle discrimination that occurs on the basis of physical or mental difference. He worries that the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was passed in 1990, might be “vulnerable,” because the Supreme Court has previously limited Congress’s ability to prohibit discrimination. (The Court has found that, in



BRIEFLY NOTED

Albert and the Whale, by Philip Hoare (*Pegasus*). This idiosyncratic account of the life, work, and afterlife of the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer considers “how art imagines our world.” Hoare shows Dürer’s responsiveness to his times. Copernicus and Martin Luther had ushered in a world “shifting nervously in space,” and printing (the “currency” of Dürer’s fame) and trade fostered unprecedented connectivity. Hoare also places his subject in a surprising lineage of artists including William Blake, Marianne Moore, Thomas Mann, and Andy Warhol. These comparisons elucidate Dürer’s radicalism, and establish him as a revolutionary and thoroughly modern artist. Hoare writes, “Before Dürer, dragons existed; after him, they did not.”

There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job, by Kikuko Tsumura, translated from the Japanese by Polly Barton (*Bloomsbury*). The nameless protagonist of this novel, burned out after fourteen years in her job, searches for work that doesn’t involve “too much responsibility.” But each of the contract gigs that follow—watching surveillance footage, writing copy for rice-cracker packaging—brings its own small miseries: isolation, boredom, competition, unpleasant encounters. Furthermore, she discovers that she can’t avoid becoming deeply invested in her work. Tsumura is adept at capturing tiny reactions, such as the insecurity triggered by an offhand remark, and building them into a picture of the emotional labor of the modern workplace.

Gold Diggers, by Sanjena Sathian (*Penguin Press*). This novel deftly weaves together magic and history to produce a compelling coming-of-age story. As a schoolboy in an Atlanta suburb, Neil, the child of Indian immigrants, feels immense pressure “to grow up in such a way that made sense of our parents’ choice to leave behind all they knew.” Hoping to get ahead, he and a friend steal gold jewelry and melt it down into a drink imbued with the ambitions and the abilities of the gold’s owner. The unexpected consequences haunt Neil into adulthood. He becomes obsessed with the mystical figure of an Indian-American gold miner, who he thinks could be “a legible American ancestor to provide guidance on how to make a life.”

The Renunciations, by Donika Kelly (*Graywolf*). “The home I’ve been making inside myself started / with a razing,” Kelly writes in her second poetry collection, a searching meditation on surviving childhood sexual abuse. These poems map the overlapping geographies of trauma and desire, combining Ovidian imagery with an emphasis on omission, redaction, and revision; some lines are broken up with bracketed white space. Kelly converses and quarrels with an alter ego called “the oracle,” to whom she voices unspeakable truths, while also probing the simultaneous grounding and alienation that occur in communing with, and breaking from, a lover: “I bend into the arc of you, which is me / trying to remember your mouth on mine, / your breath in my ear, my name blowing past.”

some circumstances, citizens have a right to discriminate.) Greene imagines a world where lawmakers could act creatively to address all kinds of unfairnesses—for example, the way our society favors people with a capacity for “logical-mathematical and verbal-linguistic intelligence.”

Greene’s approach would oblige both liberals and conservatives to accept compromises that they might find abhorrent. He notes that when the Court found that the right to privacy implied a right to abortion, for instance, it was “denying that a fetus could be a subject of constitutional concern.” As a result, abortion in America is largely unrestricted in theory but not always readily accessible in practice, mainly because of our endless fight over state-level restrictions. He thinks that we could learn something from Germany, where laws consider the interests both of pregnant women and of fetuses. Abortion is decriminalized there, but generally only in the first trimester of pregnancy, and seekers are required to speak with a counsellor; there are special benefits and rights available to new birth parents as well. Because there is no possibility of a court offering total vindication of the right to choice or the right to life, each side is more willing to live with the compromise. This is the sobering underlying message of Greene’s book, aimed at a wide range of advocates: you probably won’t win. The United States is a big country, full of obstreperous citizens who claim, or would like to claim, a broad array of rights that can’t all be recognized. In his view, the only way for us to live together is to guard our rights a little less jealously, resigning ourselves to a future in which we are entitled to most of what we want, but not all of it.

There is another way to think about what Greene calls the “rights explosion.” For many decades, the advance of gay rights in America was slow and fitful. In 2004, the year after *Lawrence v. Texas*, President George W. Bush ran for reelection while promising to amend the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage; four years later, Barack Obama, during his successful Presidential campaign, affirmed that marriage was reserved for “a man and

a woman.” But in 2015 the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples had the right to marry, and suddenly the issue was settled and political opposition melted away. There has been little effort to overturn this right, even among leaders who spent decades fighting against gay rights. L.G.B.T.Q. people in America still face discrimination and hardship. But the legalization of same-sex marriage was the kind of sweeping and definitive victory that naturally leads advocates to wonder how many more might be attainable.

Greene views the “rights explosion” as an engine of political division, but it is not clear that American politics was significantly less divisive before it or would be less divisive without it. On its own terms, certainly, this explosion has been a grand success. Speech rights, religious rights, gun rights, and privacy rights have all been expanded and defended; it is hard to argue that any previous generation enjoyed broader rights than we enjoy today. Somehow, this state of affairs has left us feeling “fractured,” as Greene puts it, and dissatisfied. Why?

One answer is that the American way of adjudicating rights is inherently tantalizing: full vindication—a court decision that would radically limit the right to abortion, or the right to own a gun—is always within sight, though rarely within reach. Even the N.R.A., having almost always prevailed in its argument that gun ownership deserves broad protection, has largely declined to celebrate such victories, concentrating instead on the possibility that some of these hard-won rights could be taken away. Greene would argue that our system is built to generate high-stakes court fights, which keep everyone anxious. In the years after the “privacy” cases, some liberals grew accustomed to thinking of the Supreme Court as an ally, often (though certainly not always) defending unpopular rights against legislators and local officials eager to violate them. But liberals are now less likely to think of themselves as members of a minority than they were when Lani Guinier wrote her defense of minority rights, perhaps because of a sense that demographic change is turning racial minorities into a national majority. At the dawn of the

nineteen-nineties, Democrats had lost three straight Presidential elections, and the Supreme Court was perceived as liberal-leaning. Nowadays, Democrats have won the popular vote in seven of the past eight Presidential elections, and the Supreme Court, where Trump and Bush appointees predominate, is conservative-leaning. It is probably no coincidence that there seems to be, on the left, a newfound appreciation for the power of democracy, and a newfound skepticism of judges—“unelected judges,” as Greene sometimes calls them, borrowing a term that conservatives once liked to use, when they were fighting what they called “judicial activism.”

Observing these reversals, one can see that what Greene calls “rightsism” is less a philosophy than a strategy, by which a minority cause can achieve a fuller political victory than might otherwise be possible. Structural and cultural shifts have convinced many on the left that their causes are broadly and increasingly popular, and that strong rights protections have become a political obstacle. But it is rash, especially in a big and insubordinate country like this one, to imagine that appeals to reasonableness and popularity will always serve as a more reliable guide to justice than the language of the Constitution. Yes, the N.R.A. used the language of rights to defeat laws that many people say they support. And, yes, America has vastly more guns than any other country, and vastly more gun violence as well. But this is how rights often work: they protect things that most people think don’t deserve protection at all. It is possible that, in the decades to come, the long expansion of gun rights in America will begin to be reversed—even Supreme Court Justices, after all, are not wholly insulated from the voters who elect the Presidents who nominate their replacements. One lesson from Carol Anderson’s book is that such a reversal would likely come with its own costs and benefits, unequally shared. But it seems possible, too, that some of the fiercest opponents of gun rights may one day find themselves championing unpopular causes of their own, and hoping not to compromise but to win. ♦

BOOKS

FAR OUT

What the Bolinas poets built.

BY DAN CHIASSON



Bolinas, California, is a settlement along the San Andreas Fault, about thirty miles north of San Francisco. The Coast Miwok people once hunted salmon there, before they were displaced by Spanish and Mexican colonists, in the early nineteenth century. Later, in waves, loggers, miners, and summer tourists took over. The town's hotels collapsed into the bay during the 1906 earthquake, and by the mid-nineteen-sixties, when the poets started showing up, Bolinas looked like a quickly erased drawing. A small colony of psychedelic busy bees soon formed, with plans for a variety of structures, from geodesic domes to tree houses. Many of the homes

were made of wood recycled from old ranches and the Navy barracks on nearby Treasure Island. Lloyd Kahn, the legendary D.I.Y. guru and an editor at the "Whole Earth Catalog," lived in town. Philo T. Farnsworth III, whose father invented the all-electric television, was there, too, planning his Yantra House, an orblike structure that had reportedly attracted the interest of the architect Buckminster Fuller.

With these alpha hippies on site, like a pack of taller, better-looking Thoreaus, the poets faced a high bar for thrift, adaptability, and invention—both on and off the page. Many, like Joanne Kyger, Gary Snyder, and Philip Wha-

len, arrived from San Francisco; others, including Lewis and Phoebe MacAdams and Tom Clark, road-tripped from New York. Those cities' counter-cultural arts scenes had begun to congeal into aesthetic schools, but there was something contradictory about their pedagogy: it was a mug's game to apprentice yourself to, say, Jack Spicer, the San Francisco writer who compared poetry to transcriptions from Mars, or to vie for a spot among the New York poets, whose art-world and Ivy League channels seemed just as interstellar. The Bolinas poets, many of them women, wrestled with more terrestrial dilemmas. "You can turn the pages / while mommy changes / you" is the entirety of "Poem for Strawberry," by Gailyn Saroyan. "A dog killed a duck & the kids found it," John Thorpe wrote in "September." "A huge gash was gone from its back but I thought we could eat the breast legs & wings." Bill Berkson's poem "A-Frame" was named for the simple houses that some people in Bolinas built, often with scavenged materials.

One of the most durable local constructions was "On the Mesa: An Anthology of Bolinas Writing," a collection of work by nearly twenty poets, published by City Lights, in 1971. Now, fifty years later, an expanded edition (which includes almost twenty more poets) has been published by the Song Cave, a small press in Brooklyn—another coastal settlement of artists, though with fewer geodesic domes. A raffish array of individual styles converge in these poems, their shared focus the place itself: they measure, sometimes with annoyance or sarcasm, the distance between the town's vibe and its hard facts. No Bolinas school ever emerges. The varieties of stanza shape, pacing, and rhythmic organization from one poet to another are remarkable. Anne Waldman, the New York experimental poet, wrote at times like a pre-Socratic:

Man grappling with wasp,
Bolinas summer 1968
is not the same man grappling
with the same wasp,
Bolinas summer 1971

Some poets gushed ("our babies toddle barefoot thru the cities of the

Their poems measured the distance between the town's vibe and its hard facts.

universe,” Diane di Prima wrote), and others mocked: among the “Things to do in Bolinas” recorded by Ted Berrigan was “watch the natives suffer.” Robert Creeley was there, building his ingenious gizmos out of tiny little words: “Things move. You’ve come to here / by one thing after another, and are here.”

These are all distinct contributions to a common tapestry. The poems act almost as dispatches from different mental dimensions. And, in a way, they were: drugs were present in Bolinas in amazing abundance and diversity—from acid and mushrooms to speed and mescaline—and took people to some far-out zones.

In an afterword to the new edition of “On the Mesa,” the scholar Lytle Shaw writes that Bolinas was the “only instance I could think of where a town was essentially governed by poets.” Shaw’s claim is almost too mild: on the evidence of this anthology, the town was governed at least in part by the poetry itself. Its residents met in the cross talk, the gossip, and the spiritual pinning found in those verses, which were often read aloud or featured in home-grown periodicals such as *The Bolinas Hit*, *The Paper*, and the *Bolinas Hearsay News*. (Some can be found online, in Kevin Opstedal’s excellent history of the Bolinas scene, “Dreaming as One.”) Poetry was stretched to accommodate all of it: town business, hallucinations, pranks, and reveries. In an untitled poem published in *The Paper*, in 1972, Ellen Sandler wrote:

I swear to God
Me and Angelica
w/Juliet
met a diabetic monkey
in a tree on Hawthorne
in the Sheriff’s yard
and if that is not as good
as Tom or Bob or Lewis or Joanne or even
Bill can do
You Can Kiss My Ass

The town’s surveying was done partly in its poetry. “Tom’s &/Angelica’s roof, Joan’s roof, eclectic unmoving houses snuggled where / the mesa slopes away,” Duncan McNaughton wrote. Several poems offered advice, *Farmer’s Almanac* style, about the crops or the weather. “Does a ring around the moon mean rain?” Anne Waldman

wrote. “If so: rain.” In a bratty, valedictory poem called “Bolinas Eyewash,” Ted Berrigan and Tom Clark follow the rain downstream:

. . . in downtown Bolinas at this moment
185 homes & businesses, Smiley’s, Snarley’s,
Pepper’s, et al. are being served by rotting
sewer pipes. Each day 45,000 gallons of raw
sewage (ugh) are discharged into the channel
at the mouth of the Bolinas Lagoon. This is a
bunch of shit. . . .

Some poets—fewer, perhaps, than one might expect—reported on events outside the bubble. Philip Whalen wrote about Vietnam, where a “handsome young Vietnamese guy from Burlington, Vermont/Just got it right in the neck,” and the 1967 Newark riots, where LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) was beaten by police: “Head bashed in under hospital bandage.”

Poetry was both a message board and a form of social trust. The names in Ellen Sandler’s poem—Tom (Clark), Bob (Creeley), Joanne (Kyger), Lewis (MacAdams), and Bill (Berkson)—suggest a locally acknowledged pantheon, but the scene took pains to level prestige among its poets, whatever their outside reputations. Though non-Bolinas hierarchies were viewed with suspicion (“X has become a great man, Y very nearly / Greater,” Whalen wrote, sarcastically), others took shape. Where you lived, whom you had sex with, what drugs you did, how long and under what conditions of distress you’d stayed in Bolinas became the trappings of local clout.

As Berrigan, the New York City soul whose taste in drugs and poems ran to speed, and Clark wrote in their collaborative poem, “the word-of-mouth network plugs you in to what’s happening inside everybody else’s houses, even if you never go there, & didn’t want to.” Clark’s “Inside the Dome of the Taj Mahal,” a poem about thwarted meditation, reveals how intense the expectation to be mellow could become:

Moonrise expresses spaces
in air, tides in the sea

illustrate old stresses
in nasal reef-voice, ah harmony
shimmering beyond choice

It took a skeptic on a stopover to

render Bolinas fully. During a brief visit in 1971, the New York School artist Joe Brainard produced perhaps the most distinctive work to emerge from the place. His “Bolinas Journal,” reissued in a limited run alongside “On the Mesa,” is a characteristic mashup of Brainard’s comics and prose sketches, and his ironic temperament lends an anthropologist’s slant to the scene. Though Brainard feels like “the same ol’ me” in the allegedly transformative locale, he’s nevertheless driven nuts by an area kid who shouts, “Is *that* Jerry Lewis?,” every time they cross paths. “I smile,” Brainard writes, “And wish the fuck he’d give it up. (Pretty embarrassing.)”

As Brainard learned, the Bolinas poets twice rallied to local causes: first to clean up the beach after the disastrous San Francisco Bay oil spill earlier that year, and then to oppose a regional sewer system that might have opened the town up to development. Brainard encountered “a lot of talk about things I don’t know much about,” including “eastern religions” and English-muffin bread—“Like in a loaf. (Sliced.) *That’s* how crazy the world really is.” This mixture of the cosmic and the parochial amused him, since he held no titles in either realm:

A lot of being inside your own head here.
A lot of talk about it. And a lot of talk about
inside other people’s heads, too.

Then a paragraph break, and then the kicker: “And a lot of talk about houses.”

If you Google “Bolinas” today, you’ll find an article about a boundary dispute that pitted Joel Coen and Frances McDormand against their neighbors, and another about an attempt to quash an affordable-housing project in town. It turns out that it doesn’t take long for “talk about houses” to become talk about real estate. If you want to see what a hippie-era house fashioned by rogue boat builders now fetches, search “Bolinas” on Zillow—I won’t spoil it.

These days, the old prank of stealing the road sign that directed day-trippers and other interlopers to town hits a little different. But with this anthology there are still dozens of other fascinating roads in and out of the place. ♦

KINDRED SPIRITS

Why did so many Victorians try to talk with the dead?

BY CASEY CEP



It's a good time to be dead—at least, if you want to keep in touch with the living. Almost a third of Americans say they have communicated with someone who has died, and they collectively spend more than two billion dollars a year for psychic services on platforms old and new. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, television: whatever the medium, there's a medium. Like clairvoyants in centuries past, those of today also fill auditoriums, lecture halls, and retreats. Historic camps such as Lily Dale, in New York, and Casadaga, in Florida, are booming, with tens of thousands of people visiting every year to attend séances, worship, healing services, and readings. And many peo-

ple turn up not every year but every week: there are more than a hundred Spiritualist churches in the United States, more than three hundred in the United Kingdom, and hundreds of others in more than thirty countries around the world. Such institutions hardly represent the full extent of Spiritualism's popularity, since the movement does not emphasize doctrines, dogmas, or creeds, and plenty of people hold spiritualist beliefs within other faith traditions or stand entirely outside organized religion.

The surging numbers are reminiscent of the late nineteenth century, when somewhere between four million and eleven million people identified as Spir-

itualists in the United States alone. Some of the leaders back then were hucksters, and some of the believers were easy marks, but the movement cannot be dismissed merely as a collision of the cunning and the credulous. Early Spiritualism attracted some of the great scientists of the day, including the physicists Marie and Pierre Curie, the evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, and the psychologist William James, all of whom believed that modern scientific methods, far from standing in opposition to the spiritual realm, could finally prove its existence.

So culturally prevalent was Spiritualism at the time that even skeptics and dabblers felt compelled to explore it. Mark Twain, Frederick Douglass, and Queen Victoria all attended séances, and although plenty of people declined to attend so much as a single table-turning, the movement was hard to avoid; in the span of four decades, according to one estimate, a new book about Spiritualism was published roughly once a week. These included scientific-seeming tomes purporting to offer evidence of the afterlife, as well as wildly popular memoirs such as "Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance" and "Shadow Land; or, Light from the Other Side." Meanwhile, more than a hundred American Spiritualist periodicals were in regular circulation, advertising public lectures and private séances in nearly eight hundred cities and towns across the country.

A recent spate of histories of the Spiritualist craze and biographies of some of its central characters have attempted to locate the movement's origins in various cultural, political, and technological aspects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These accounts vary in both plausibility and persuasiveness, yet all of them are interesting—partly because of what they tell us about the Victorian era, but also because of what they suggest about the resurgence of Spiritualism today.

Because Spiritualism so strongly rejected hierarchy and orthodoxy, it is difficult to say exactly when or how it started. Plenty of scholars regard it as part of the larger religious efflorescence that began in the early nineteenth century in the area of New York State that became known as the Burned-Over District, which gave rise to the Second Great

Among its other effects, spiritual work gave women the chance to speak in public.



"I forgot how much I missed seeing a movie with an audience I hate."

Awakening. Others, including Robert S. Cox, in his magisterial "Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism," have looked far beyond that century and that countryside. This long view was also taken by one of Spiritualism's first major historians, the novelist Arthur Conan Doyle, who became so zealous a believer that he set aside Sherlock Holmes in order to focus on his research, ultimately writing more than a dozen books on the subject. His two-volume "History of Spiritualism" starts by situating the movement as "the most important in the history of the world since the Christ episode," then proposes the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, born in the sixteen-eighties, and the Scottish reformer Edward Irving, born in 1792, as forerunners of the Victorians.

But most accounts of Spiritualism don't begin with great men or distant precedents. They start with little women on an exact date: March 31, 1848. On that night, as Emily Midorikawa details in her new book, "Out of the Shadows: Six Visionary Victorian Women in Search of a Public Voice" (Counterpoint), two sisters, fourteen-year-old

Margaretta Fox and eleven-year-old Catherine, finally convinced some of their neighbors that an unsettling series of knockings and tapplings in their home, near the south shore of Lake Ontario, was coming from the spirit world. Soon the whole town of Hydesville, New York, was gripped by the mysterious noises that haunted the Fox family.

Maggie and Kate, as the Fox sisters were known, claimed that they were able to communicate with the maker of those noises, which they said was a spirit called Mr. Splitfoot. From beyond the grave, the spirit answered their questions, first rapping back to respond with a simple yes or no, then using a more complicated series of raps to indicate letters of the alphabet. In this manner, the spirit allegedly revealed that he had been murdered for money some five years previously and been buried in the cellar of the Fox house. That revelation only further excited the residents of Wayne County—no strangers to new religious claims, since they had already welcomed the Shakers at Sodus Bay, witnessed the founding of Mormonism at Palmyra, and lately outlived the dooms-

day prophecies of the nearby Millerites.

The Foxes fled their haunted home, but the rapping followed the girls into other houses during the next few months, and their sensational story continued to spread. In the fall of 1849, four hundred people gathered at Corinthian Hall, in nearby Rochester, where the Foxes demonstrated what they had advertised as "WONDERFUL PHENOMENA" for a paying audience—the first of many during the next forty years. William Lloyd Garrison and James Fenimore Cooper came for séances with the girls, and Horace Greeley and his wife, Mary, not only visited with the sisters but boosted their celebrity in Greeley's newspapers, including the New-York *Daily Tribune*, which would go on to cover the Spiritualist craze as dozens and then hundreds of others claimed that they, too, were capable of hearing "spirit rapping."

According to Midorikawa, the Greeleys were representative of some of the earliest and most enthusiastic adherents of Spiritualism: affluent and progressive mothers and fathers who were desperate to communicate with sons and daughters who had died too young. In the mid-nineteenth century, an estimated twenty to forty per cent of children died before the age of five, and scholars often point to this fact to help account for the appeal of Spiritualism. But it was worse in the preceding centuries; for some time, the child mortality rate had been falling. What mattered more was that the average family size was shrinking, too, at the same time that modern ideas of childhood were taking hold—trends that combined to make the loss of any child seem that much more anguishing.

But it wasn't only the death of children that brought people to Spiritualism, or kept them in the fold. Mary Todd Lincoln, who lost three of her four children, visited with mediums in Georgetown before hosting her own séances in the Red Room of the White House. She also hired the country's most famous "spirit photographer" to take a picture of her with her husband after he was assassinated. Peter Manseau's "The Apparitionists: A Tale of Phantoms, Fraud, Photography, and the Man Who Captured Lincoln's Ghost" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) offers a fascinat-

ing account of that photographer, William H. Mumler, who worked as a jewelry engraver in Boston before taking a self-portrait that, when developed, revealed what became known as an “extra”: in his case, a young girl sitting in a chair to his right, whom he recognized as a cousin who had died a dozen years before. Mourning portraits—paintings of the recently dead—had long been popular, but spirit photographs offered something more: not just the memorialization of lost loved ones but confirmation of life after death.

In the years following the Civil War, when around three-quarters of a million dead soldiers haunted the country, spirit photographs were in high demand. After Spiritualism migrated to Europe, its prominence there tracked loosely to war, too, with a spike following the First World War. Mumler alone took dozens of spirit photographs, in which deceased friends or relatives appeared behind or beside their living loved ones. Other photographers focussed on capturing active séances, table-turnings, acts of levitation, and even ectoplasm—spiritual substances that mediums “exteriorized” from their own bodies, often their mouths, noses, or ears, but sometimes their stomachs or vaginas. Such substances could be clear or dark, pasty or gauzy, shapeless or in the form of appendages or faces.

Technological explanations for the rise of Spiritualism often cite the development of photography, which at the time was an inherently spooky medium, in that it could show things that were not actually there. Although it can be hard to remember in the age of deep fakes, photography was initially thought of not as a manipulable art but as a mirrorlike representation of reality, which made its role in Spiritualism seem probative. Other technologies similarly seemed to bridge such unfathomable gaps that the one between this world and the next appeared certain to collapse as well. The telegraph, for instance, offered access to voices from the beyond; how far beyond was anyone’s guess. The very word for those who could talk with spirits reflected all the new “mediums” through which information could be transmitted; spirit photographs were marketed alongside spirit telegraphs, spirit fingerprints, and spirit typewriters. In-

ventors such as Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison even tinkered with uncanny radios and spirit telephones, inspired by some of the disembodied voices of their own experiments and curious about the supernatural implications of electromagnetism and other universal energies.

Still, like the appeal to mortality rates, this account of the rise of Spiritualism goes only so far. For one thing, no notable uptick in spiritualist beliefs accompanied earlier technological upheavals, including the entire Industrial Revolution, even though it altered our sense of time and set all kinds of things spinning and moving in previously unimaginable ways. For another, some of the most popular Spiritualist technologies were some of the oldest: the Ouija board was simply a branded, pencil-less version of the planchette, and forms of planchette writing had been around for centuries.

The use of technology to document spiritual phenomena was of interest not only to believers but also to skeptics, who pored over images looking for cheesecloth passing as ectoplasm, overexposures masquerading as ghostly apparitions, and wires or pulleys that could account for rappings and table-turnings. In one of the most publicized attempts to test the claims of Spiritualists, *Scientific American* offered five thousand dollars in prize money to anyone who could produce psychic phenomena sufficient to convince a committee that consisted of academics from Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, psychic experts, and also Harry Houdini, who knew something about illusions and developed a sideline in exposing those which hucksters were trying to pass off as real. Armed with electroscopes and galvanometers, the committee tested all mediums who presented themselves for scrutiny, sometimes attending multiple séances before rendering a verdict.

Houdini’s debunking of one famous medium, Mina Crandon, is thoroughly recounted in David Jaher’s “The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World” (Crown). Crandon was married to a prominent surgeon and attracted Boston’s elite to her performances, channelling her dead

brother’s voice and even revealing his fingerprints from beyond the grave, while also levitating tables and producing ectoplasm from her mouth and from between her legs, often while naked. (The backlash against Spiritualism, which came partly from the clergy, stemmed not only from its challenge to orthodox ideas about Heaven and Hell but also from its scandalous exhibitionism.) Crandon’s case divided the *Scientific American* committee, with some members accusing others of having been sexually coerced into validating her fraud and even conspiring with her. Houdini had already exposed the deceptions of other mediums in his book “A Magician Among the Spirits,” and he never relented in his effort to discredit Crandon, publishing an entire pamphlet detailing her tricks, and going so far as to incorporate some of them into his own stage act in order to demonstrate their fraudulence.

Houdini prevented Crandon from winning the *Scientific American* prize, but her fame only grew, and her case later splintered another group of researchers. The American Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1885, a few years after its British equivalent, was devoted to the investigation of spiritual phenomena, which the society considered as worthy of careful study as fossils or electricity. In “Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death” (Penguin), Deborah Blum

records the society’s investigations into everything from haunted houses to hypnotism. For the most part, those investigations only ever succeeded in disproving the phenomena they studied, but it was James, a founding member, who best articulated why they nonetheless continued their work.

“If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black,” he said, “you mustn’t seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white.”

“My own white crow,” James announced in that same address to the Society for Psychical Research, “is Mrs. Piper.” He was referring to Leonora Piper, a Boston housewife turned trance medium who withstood years of testing



and observation, her fees rising twenty-fold in the meantime and her fame extending all the way to England, where she went on tour. On one occasion, Piper impressed the James family by making contact with an aunt of theirs. Asked about the elderly woman's health, the medium informed them that the woman had died earlier that day. "Why Aunt Kate's here," Piper said. "All around me I hear voices saying, 'Aunt Kate has come.'" The Jameses received a telegram a few hours later confirming Aunt Kate's death the night before.

Unlike Crandon, Piper was not fully discredited, though many people doubted her abilities, noting her failed readings and prophecies and offering convincing psychological explanations of those predictions and telepathic readings which seemed accurate. Her feats as a medium were not particular to the James family; in the course of her career, she claimed to channel, among others, Martin Luther and George Washington. As such efforts suggest, the allure of Spiritualism was not limited to consolation for the bereft: plenty of mediums worked as much in the tradition of the carnival barker as in that of the cleric, and Spiritualism was popular in part because it was entertaining. Its practitioners, some of them true connoisseurs of spectacle, promised not only reassurances about the well-being of the dearly departed but also new lines from Shakespeare and fresh wisdom from Plato.

Even more strikingly, from the perspective of the present day, early mediums offered encounters with the culturally dispossessed as well as with the culturally heralded. Piper, for instance, claimed to channel not only Washington and Luther but also a young Native American girl named Chlorine. And she was not alone in allegedly relaying the posthumous testimony of marginalized people. Enslaved African-Americans and displaced Native Americans were routinely channelled by mediums in New England and around the country. Whether race persisted in the afterlife was a matter of some dispute, but racially stereotyped and ethnically caricatured "spirit guides" were common, conjured with exaggerated dialects for audiences at séances and captured in sensational costumes by spirit photography. Flora Wellman, the mother of

the novelist Jack London, claimed to channel a Native American chief called Plume; the Boston medium Mrs. J. H. Conant became associated with a young Piegan Blackfoot girl she called Vashti. Mediums with abolitionist sympathies passed on the stories of tortured slaves, while pro-slavery Spiritualists delivered messages of forgiveness from the same population and relayed visions of an afterlife where racial hierarchies were preserved.

For white mediums, communicating with spirits of other races could be a form of expiation, a way to confront violent histories and make cultural amends—or merely crude appropriation, garish performance art that was good for business. But Spiritualism was not only a white phenomenon. There were plenty of Black Spiritualists—including Sojourner Truth, who lived for a decade in the Spiritualist utopia of Harmonia before settling in Battle Creek, Michigan—and many Black mediums, including Paschal Beverly Randolph and Rebecca Cox Jackson, both of whom wrote books that included their work with spirits. Harriet E. Wilson, one of the first Black authors to publish a novel in the United States, later became a Spiritualist healer who was known, like some of her white counterparts, for summoning indigenous spirits, and who was described, in one of Boston's Spiritualist newspapers, as "the eloquent and earnest colored trance medium."

The lines between syncretism and appropriation were often fuzzy. If the initial Victorian wave of Spiritualism had a distinctly American character, later iterations took on global influences, as when the theosophists incorporated elements of Eastern religions, including belief in reincarnation and past lives. Immigration and translation brought sacred literatures into renewed contact with one another—the Bardo Thodol handed to readers of the Zohar, the Vedas and the Upanishads circulating alongside Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart. Occult practices melded with culturally blurry techniques of meditating and altering consciousness, and the roots of the esotericism that would eventually be known as New Age took hold.

As a belief system, Spiritualism was largely free of the legal and moral strictures of orthodox religion. It made few demands on its practitioners, while of-

fering them many rewards, from an uplifting and personalized vision of the afterlife to otherwise unavailable opportunities in this one. In its Victorian incarnation, Spiritualism had provided ways for female mediums to lead and to profit. The medium Annie Denton Cridge became a newspaper publisher and wrote one of the earliest feminist utopian novels, wherein the narrator dreams first of a matriarchal government on Mars that oppresses men, and then that America has a female President; Victoria Woodhull, a clairvoyant turned suffragist, became, with her sister, one of the first women to start a brokerage firm on Wall Street and, later, the first to actually run for President of the United States; Emma Hardinge Britten, an opera-singing skeptic who set out to discredit the Spiritualists but ended up joining them, became one of the country's most popular public speakers and helped Abraham Lincoln win reelection. But they and other Spiritualists faced a cultural backlash almost immediately. The religion scholar Ann Braude's groundbreaking "Radical Spirits" (Beacon) situates spiritual work as social and political activism, since it gave women the opportunity to speak in public, and as a foundation of the women's-rights movement, since it demonstrated the equality of the sexes. Such a framing helps explain why Spiritualism became so ridiculed, and why its opponents sought to discredit its female leaders most vigorously.

Not that those opponents needed a great deal of assistance. Much of the disillusionment came from the inside—including via the Fox sisters, the Hydesville girls credited with starting the Spiritualist craze. For years afterward, they entertained private gatherings and large public audiences in America and England. All the while, they endured examinations by physicians and gadflies, who strip-searched them, looking for bodily explanations or external assistance, and were attacked by mobs of Christians and secular skeptics alike, who threatened them with grenades and guns. Many people had tried to discredit them, but, in the end, they discredited themselves: in 1888, Maggie Fox, fulfilling the wishes of the late famous Arctic explorer Elisha Kane, whom she had

allegedly married in secret, declared that the whole thing had been a hoax.

As Midorikawa recounts in “Out of the Shadows,” a newspaper advertisement ran in New York City in October of that year announcing the “DEATH OF SPIRITUALISM” and promising “A THOROUGH AND COMPLETE EXPOSE.” With her sister Kate watching from the audience, Maggie, now in her fifties, appeared onstage at the Academy of Music, on Fourteenth Street, put on a pair of glasses, and read from a prepared statement confessing “the greatest sorrow of my life”: namely, that she and her sister had collaborated in “perpetrating the fraud of Spiritualism upon a too confiding public.” After her reading ended, three doctors came to the stage and waited for her to begin cracking her big toe; each doctor then confirmed that the rappings were coming from the clicking of her joints, which grew louder and louder until finally she shouted, “Spiritualism is a fraud from beginning to end!”

The scandal crossed the Atlantic faster than any steamship, and Spiritualists around the world reeled. A written confession followed the performance, describing how Kate “was the first to observe that by swishing her fingers she could produce certain noises with her knuckles and joints and that the same effect could be made with the toes,” and that after a great deal of practice the girls mastered making these noises in the dark. “Like most perplexing things when made clear, it is astonishing how easily it is done,” Maggie Fox said. But, the very next year, Fox recanted her recanting, leaving both sides to claim and reject the testimony of the sisters as they

saw fit, a contest that was still unresolved when, a few years later, both sisters died poor.

Helped along by such scandals and the passage of time, Spiritualism eventually moved to the fringes. It became a kind of curiosity, a Victorian fad encountered chiefly in the biographies of artists such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who dabbled in mesmerism; in the footnotes to the modernist poetry of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, with their invocations of astrology, sorcery, and Madame Blavatsky; in museum exhibits of the mystical paintings of Hilma af Klint; in horror films like “Ouija” and “Things Heard & Seen.” Spiritualism is most often invoked only to be discredited, and cynical accounts routinely sneer at the sincerity or impugn the sanity of individual believers, unwilling or unable to imagine the appeal of a movement that dominated several decades of religious life both here and abroad.

Still, purely cynical accounts like those are dead ends—intellectual cul-de-sacs, bent on describing Spiritualism as a passing phenomenon when, in reality, the movement never really came or went. Necromancy had only just faded from cultural memory when Queen Victoria was born, and long after her death people with spiritualist beliefs continued to gather, as they still do, meeting regularly at the Golden Gate Spiritualist Church in San Francisco, the Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, the Summerland Church of Light on Long Island, and the Wimbledon Spiritualist Church in London, to say nothing of the nearly four million active spiritists in Brazil.

The flaw in most efforts to account

for historical iterations of Spiritualism is that they look exclusively to transient features at the expense of more fundamental ones. It is true that today’s Spiritualists have something in common with their Victorian predecessors, situated as they are in another era of rapid technological change and increasing secularization; the Internet and virtual reality are the present moment’s photography and telegraphy, technologies so advanced that they approach the uncanny; then as now, a vast penumbra of proto-spiritualists surround the true believers. No longer persuaded by orthodox religious accounts but also not satisfied with pure materialism, they experiment with psychics, crystals, tarot, and astrological charts, or simply swap stories of the eerie and the unexplained.

But, if today’s Spiritualists have much in common with the Victorians, they also have something in common with the ancient Romans, who celebrated the festival of Lemuria by making food offerings to their restless dead, and with the Israelite King Saul, who consulted a medium in the Canaanite city of Endor. Arthur Conan Doyle’s long view may well be the right one, for, as he wrote, there is “no time in the recorded history of the world when we do not find traces of preternatural interference and a tardy recognition of them from humanity.” The dread of mortality has always inspired the dream of immortality, and the hopes that animated Victorian Spiritualism are eternal: to bridge the divide between ourselves and those we have lost, to know that they are safe and content, and to believe that they are thinking of us just as much as we are thinking of them. ♦

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VOLUME XCVII, NO. 14, May 31, 2021. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue’s cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Jackie Marks, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Carolita Johnson, must be received by Sunday, May 30th. The finalists in the May 17th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 14th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“If you're so civilized, why don't you use a coaster?”
Andrew K. Shaffer, Cupertino, Calif.

“I just can't get past the difference in our ages.”
Deborah Casey, Toronto, Ont.

“I can evolve.”
Stephen R. Grimm, Larchmont, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Oh, hey, I almost didn't recognize you outside of work.”
Ben Rosenberg, Atlanta, Ga.

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